LONG LIVE CDs! 6 TOP TIPS FOR BUYING A NEW PLAYER

australian
hi-fi

REVIEWED

DIGITAL DIVINE

Silent Angel streamer
delivers heavenly sound

THE BEST KIT ON THE PLANET

29 EXPERT-PICKED WINNERS INSIDE!

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EXPERT IMAGING AND
SOUND ASSOCIATION
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ISSUE 542
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REVIEWED

RARE BREED

SpectraFlora speakers
are truly one of a kind

REVIEWED

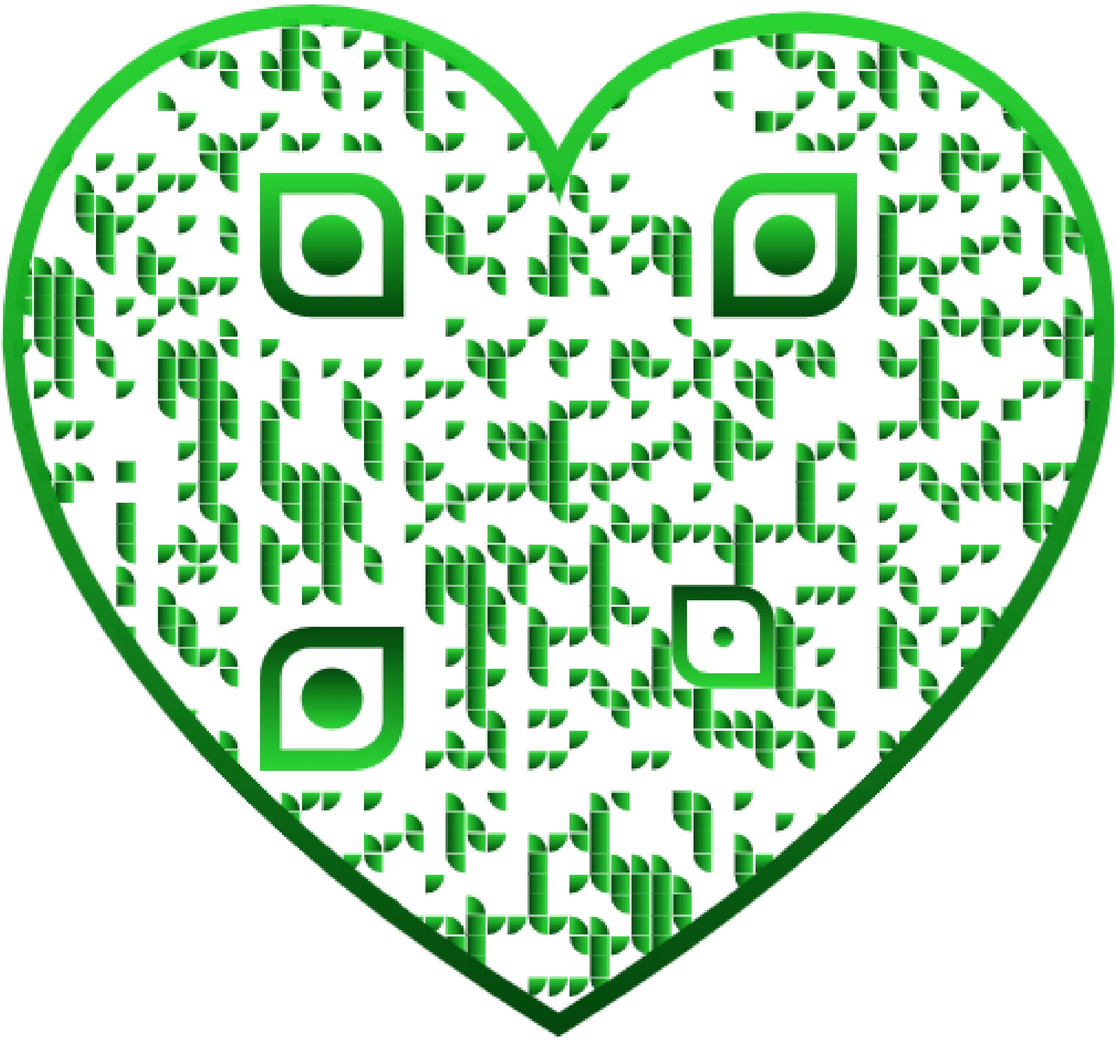
SUPERPOWER

Petite March Audio
amps pack a punch

REVIEWED

PRO ACTIVES

ATC serves up studio
sound for the home



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WATTSON AUDIO MADISON STREAMER & POWER AMPLIFIER

The Madison Streamer and Amplifier by Wattson Audio blend high-performance, precision engineering with elegant, compact design.

The Streamer features an upgradable DSP-driven DAC and digital volume control, delivering both technical accuracy and emotional musicality, and can connect directly to power amps or integrate with existing audio systems.

Meanwhile, the Madison Amplifier combines CH Precision's reference-grade performance with Wattson's refined aesthetics, offering dynamic, transparent sound with tonal purity and adaptable configurations—from stereo to bi-amp or mono. Together, they provide a versatile, high-fidelity audio experience that redefines expectations at an accessible price point.

Editor's lead in

Ignoring the paradox of choice for a moment, it has never been easier to 'get into' hi-fi. You can have everything you need for true stereo hi-fi playback in just a pair of neat speaker boxes thanks to the rise of system-holistic streaming speakers. At the other end of that spectrum, of course, is the purist, 'sound-first' separates route.

However, somewhere in the middle of that wide gulf, increasingly overshadowed by those two most popular system paths, is another solution that I believe nails the balance between performance and convenience even better, and which I'm surprised isn't more popular: active speakers, connected to a source.

This best-of-both-worlds solution requires an extra box (and cable) compared to streaming speakers, but still fewer boxes (and cables) than a separates system. And it makes a lot of sense from a performance perspective.

You see, active speakers work differently from a traditional system (and powered speakers), and offer performance benefits in doing so. In a typical set-up of, say, a music streamer, stereo amplifier and pair of passive speakers, the power amplification stage (in the stereo amp) goes before the crossover section (in the speaker) in the chain. In this case, the crossover splitting the signal's frequencies and directing them to the correct drive unit is passive (it doesn't need power) and works at the speaker level, meaning that the capacitors and resistors in the crossover network are designed to handle hundreds of watts of power and therefore tend to be wider-tolerence components. So if the tweeter is 10% too high at the crossover point, the integration and tonal balance of the speaker suffers accordingly.

With active speakers, however, the crossover goes before the power amp (both are now within the speaker), and the crossover is active and can work at the much lower power levels — say, half a watt. That means components can be more finely toleranced to what they actually need to do.

Because of this, and the fact that the amp is a) chosen specifically for the drive unit, and b) connected directly to it, you get lower distortion and higher accuracy and control.

The caveat is that very few manufacturers of active speakers are also experts in electronics, so amplifiers are often chosen off-the-shelf from an OEM and not necessarily optimally implemented. You also have active speakers' inherent upgrade limitation, and perceived value suffers due to the fact that much of the expense (the amps and active crossover) is hidden inside the cabinets.

Choose wisely and be at peace with the upgrade restriction, however, and active speakers make a lot of sense — especially now that they are predominantly neatly integrated two-box affairs (although some still require an extra connectivity box). Some readers will inevitably remember their primary and performance-optimal implementation, whereby each speaker drive unit was driven by a separate amp, and a crossover was also housed in a separate box (remember the Naim Naxo?), which often made for double-digit box counts!

So why choose active speakers and a music streamer rather than the increasingly popular all-in streaming speaker system (essentially active speakers with streaming chips and circuitry)? Generally, whenever you pack more components into a small space, performance suffers due to the interference. Theoretically, taking the sensitive stuff outside of the speaker is both mechanically and electrically preferable.

A very fine example of an active speaker lies in this very issue (page 24) from one of the most renowned in the game, ATC. It's one of five reviews in the following pages, and a cracking issue in general, which I'm particularly pleased about as it is, I'm afraid to say, my last. Starting a family is taking me back to pastures old (Devon, England) for a period of time, and I'm very pleased to introduce Max Langridge as my successor in the Editor's chair.

Max, a fellow Brit and whom I first worked alongside at *What Hi-Fi?* twelve years ago, has been involved in *Australian Hi-Fi* as a reviewer and Production Editor for over a year, and will be an enthusiastic Editor. So, dear readers, I leave you in capable hands. Keep listening!

rebecca.roberts@futurenet.com

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OUR FRONT COVER

Australian Hi-Fi is a proud member of the EISA community, comprised of 54 expert reviewers who come together annually to decorate the year's best kit. You can find the worthy winners from page 41. Elsewhere, we have another four highly recommendable products, half of which are designed right here in Australia!

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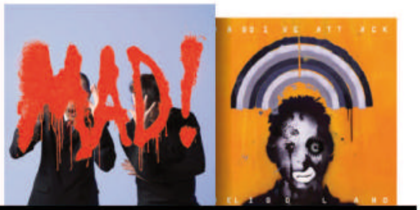

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Issue 542

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Please call CRM on (02) 8227 6486
or visit www.techmags.com.au

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Printed by IVE GROUP

Distribution: Are Direct Pty Limited (www.aredirect.com.au)

ISSN 0159-0030

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AVENTHO 100
AVENTHO 100

New owners, new headphones

Beyerdynamic is being bought by Chinese manufacturer Cosonic, marking a significant moment in the 100-year history of the headphones brand, which has been family-owned ever since it was founded in 1924.

The German company was born in Berlin, with its founding father, Eugen Beyer, specialising in cinema loudspeakers. It has since made microphones, as used by Queen Elizabeth II and The Beatles, and it created the first dynamic headphones with electrostatic reproduction characteristics, the DT 880.

According to reports, the company is being bought for €122 million, though Beyerdynamic's CEO, Andreas Rapp, says this could change. A large part of the sale will be used to repay loans.

According to Rapp, this deal, which is expected to complete before the end of this year, will enable Beyerdynamic to invest in its future. "The shareholders have recognised that future investments cannot be financed with the current structure," he told German website *heise online* when the acquisition was first announced in June. "They have therefore decided to sell the company to an interested party who will not only continue Beyerdynamic's 100-year history, but also take it forward to continue to survive in the international markets."

Rapp has promised that nothing will change for employees, with all contracts remaining valid, and that the firm will also continue to operate as an independent company.

My colleague spoke to Richard Campbell, Beyerdynamic's Managing Director, who spoke positively of the acquisition, saying that it will allow the brand to grow "bigger and better and beyond" what it can currently achieve.

"The expectation is that we will continue to be handmade in Germany [and] we expect that we'll continue to develop technology out of Germany as we have been," he said.

Around 85% of Beyerdynamic's microphones and headphones — including the high-end T1 Gen 3 over-ears, DT 700 studio range, MMX gaming series and Amiron wireless model — are handmade at the manufacturer's production site in Heilbronn, Germany.

While not a big name in audio circles, Cosonic has served as a contract manufacturer for various audio brands. It is believed to want to use the acquisition to boost its profile outside of China and expand through Beyerdynamic's established international sales network.

For now, it is business as usual, with Beyerdynamic having since launched its latest pair of Aventho line wireless headphones. The Aventho 100 ($349) join the existing Aventho 300 ($640), although this time they are on-ear as opposed to over-ear designs.

The closed-back cans use a set of 45mm dynamic drivers crafted to deliver an "uncompromising sound experience". The Aventho 100 also offer active noise cancellation in two flavours — classic ANC alongside a passthrough Transparency mode — as well as voice calling powered by Qualcomm's Clear Voice Cancellation technology.

The new on-ears also deliver up to 60 hours of listening without ANC (or 40 hours with it activated), while a speedy 15-minute fast-charge grants up to 15 hours of playtime.

Inspired by the vintage aesthetic of the 1970s, the foldable on-ears aim to bring "timeless style to today's listeners," while a light-weight structure aims to prevent wearer fatigue.

The Aventho 100 are available now in black, brown or cream finishes. A 3.5mm aux cable, USB-C charging cable and a drawstring carrying bag are supplied in the box.

For more information, contact Synchronised Technology on 1300 467 968 or visit www.syntec.com.au

Compact, colourful all-in-two system

Elac has unveiled its latest powered bookshelf speaker system, the Debut ConneX DCB61. Taking the blueprint laid down by the excellent Debut Connex DCB41, the more sophisticated DCB61 aims to improve on the performance of its smaller sibling courtesy of increased power and new drive units.

The new speaker system has been designed with performance and versatility at the fore, combining "refined audio engineering with plug-and-play simplicity". The main speaker houses dedicated Class D amplifiers for each drive unit, delivering supposedly room-filling sound in a more convenient package.

Each two-way bookshelf speaker features a 16.5cm polypropylene mid/bass woofer powered by a 60-watt amplifier in pursuit of deep, punchy and controlled bass. This is complemented by a 19mm soft-dome tweeter, driven by a dedicated 20-watt amplifier and fitted with a precision-engineered waveguide that promises a smoother, more accurate top-end signature.

The new model also features Elac's XBass Enhancer technology, which strives for deeper bass extension for an overall "richer, more dynamic sound".

What about physical inputs? Well, it's quite the modern suite. An HDMI eARC allows you to integrate the speakers into your AV system, and a moving-magnet phono stage is onboard for hooking up a record player. USB Type-B and optical inputs are also onboard for laptops and audio sources, while wireless connectivity is taken care of thanks to their support of the high-quality LC3+ Bluetooth codec. Playback control, meanwhile, can be facilitated via the dedicated companion app.

Considering the sonic talents of the Debut ConneX DCB41, the prospect of a larger, more powerful step-up model is certainly appealing, especially if it can improve on the slightly lacklustre phono stage of the smaller model.

The Elac ConneX DCB61 is available now in four finishes — white, olive green, black and walnut — priced at $1,499. Indeed, that's a significant advance on the $900 launch price of its sibling, but as this is a larger and more ambitious system, that leap is hardly a surprise.

For more information, contact Synergy Audio Visual on (03) 9459 7474 or visit www.synergyaudio.com

The Hi-Fi Headlines

NEW ARRIVALS AT LEN WALLIS AUDIO

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NEWSLETTER NO.274

Good News on the Bookshelf Speaker Front!

Serhan Swift MU2 MkII and Triangle Borea BR04

We've refreshed our display pair of Serhan Swift MU2 MkII bookshelf speakers with a stunning new Tasmanian Blackwood finish. Sonically unchanged, the new look elevates their appeal. These Australian-designed, compact speakers fill all but the largest rooms, drawing you into the music with ease. Pair them with the Musical Fidelity A1 for a match made in heaven!

Our admiration of these Australian designed and built bookshelf speakers is well known. Small in stature they will fill all but the largest of rooms and will do what all good speakers should do – draw you into the music!

Finally, and circling back to the EISA Awards, another favorite brand of ours, Triangle, has also picked up an award for the second year running. This time it was for the Borea BR04 bookshelf speaker, which was awarded 'Best value bookshelf speakers.'

The Borea series has redefined value in our industry – excellent performance at exceptionally pricing. The BR04 is a classic example of this, a great sounding two-way bookshelf speaker with a silk-dome tweeter selling for $1,100 the pair. These, like all the Borea series, offer extraordinary value for money. Visit us to hear it for yourself!

Serhan Swift MU2 MkII

Musical Fidelity Wins Again!

B1xi amplifier

Celebrating Awards and New Releases

Musical Fidelity is on a winning streak, expanding their acclaimed Nu-Vista range into the hi-end market over the past two years. At the same time, they've relaunched the iconic A1 integrated amplifier—a true bargain in entry-level amplification. The A1 earned the 'Enthusiasts Amplifier of 2024-2025' at last year's prestigious EISA Awards, praised for its "organic, almost tube-like presentation that delivers music in a thrillingly expansive, expressive fashion"—a reminder of an amplifier's core mission.

A1 integrated amplifier

The success continues with the newly released B1xi amplifier, named 'Best Value Integrated Amplifier' at this year's EISA Awards. While the design of the A1 is very heavily based on its predecessor, the B1xi borrows only its name from the legendary B1 amplifier of the '80s. The chassis design is similar to the more expensive 'M' series, and it houses a slew of more modern technologies, including an on-board DAC, HDMI ARC input, Bluetooth connectivity, and what Musical Fidelity does best, a phono input. The B1xi is due in Australia late September 2025 for $1,600—an exceptional value you won't want to miss.

Plus, Musical Fidelity offers a special bundle: the MXDAC digital-to-analogue converter, MXStream streamer, and a pair of Inakustik Exzellenz series USB cables for $2,980—a $745 saving while existing stock lasts. Upgrade your setup with this limited-time deal!

Why Upgrade Now?

Elevate your audio with Musical Fidelity's award-winning A1 and B1xi amplifiers, plus the exclusive MXDAC bundle—perfect before the B1xi arrives in late September 2025. Enhance your setup with Serhan Swift MU2 MkII's new finish or Triangle's Borea BR04, both delivering exceptional sound at unbeatable prices. Visit Len Wallis Audio to experience these products and discover why we've been trusted since 1978. Visit us and transform your listening experience!

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From speakers to soundbar

KEF was one of the first specialist hi-fi brands to get into home cinema speaker packages back in the early nineties, and it has continued to operate in the market since then. It may come as a surprise, therefore, that the brand is only now releasing its first soundbar.

Enter the KEF XIO, a 5.1.2 premium Dolby Atmos soundbar that the British company says is designed to excel with movies *and* music. This is an ambitious goal given that most soundbars struggle to achieve this duality, although considering its expertise in both fields, KEF is arguably better equipped to nail this than most.

It is certainly confident, calling the XIO a "KEF signature hi-fi system in a soundbar, delivering a transcendent cinematic sound experience".

The 12-strong driver configuration includes six Uni-Q MX drivers, three of which are on the top of the soundbar for upward-firing sound, but with the one in the centre employed only when the soundbar is wall-mounted. That leaves the remaining three MX drivers facing forward.

The MX isn't like a traditional Uni-Q design. Rather than having two separate drive units (a tweeter and mid/bass) that fit into a single assembly, this new Uni-Q MX design has a dual diaphragm arrangement that features a clever mechanical crossover to allow the high-frequency central section to operate separately.

On top of that are four P185 LF bass drivers that feature a technology called 'P Flex', which is an indented surround that allows the cone to retract and detract more. The P185 is a rectangular design, 51 x 180mm in size. KEF claims that each has the same radiating area as a traditional circular 10cm driver unit, but that the rectangular shape allows the soundbar to be considerably slimmer than would otherwise be the case.

Perhaps even more unusual is the Velocity Control Technology (VECO) built into the drive unit. Here, a flexible PCB printed with a sensing coil takes the place of a traditional former (the component that the main coil wraps around) and measures the speed of movement. This allows the soundbar's 'brain' to compensate for any errors detected.

Finally, there are two conventional full-range drivers. Given that they are only 50mm in diameter, maybe 'full range' is pushing it, but what they do is push the soundfield wider.

Together, the drive units are driven by no fewer than 12 Class D amplifiers, which KEF claims deliver a meaty 820 watts of peak power.

In terms of connectivity, the XIO has HDMI 2.1 eARC, optical and Bluetooth. An RCA output is also available so you can connect a standard wired subwoofer, and KEF has also launched the KW2 RX transmitter ($280), which allows any subwoofer (though naturally it is neatest with KEF's own models) to be connected wirelessly.

The XIO supports DTS:X as well as Dolby Atmos. There's MPEG-H, too, with specific compatibility with Sony 360 Reality Audio. And when it comes to streaming services, you aren't shortchanged either: Amazon Music, Qobuz, Tidal (Connect), Deezer and Spotify (Connect) are all onboard.

Available in black or silver, the KEF XIO costs $3,600, which isn't far off Sennheiser Ambeo Max territory! According to my *What Hi-Fi?* colleagues who have already tested it, it is worth that hefty outlay. They called it "supremely easy to listen to, creating an impressively wide sense of space for a soundbar while maintaining balance and expressiveness" and "one of the best soundbars" they have heard.

For more information, contact Audio Marketing on (02) 9882 3877 or visit www.audiomarketing.com.au

Home entertainment hybrid

The Bluesound Powernode was something of a pioneer in the world of streaming amplifiers, arriving before the industry had even settled on the product category term, so a new model is always big news. The 2025 incarnation (called, like its predecessor, simply 'Bluesound Powernode') offers more power while promising less distortion and smarter home integration.

The $1,850 just-add-speakers system is designed for "people who want powerful sound in a simple, streamlined package — a way to stream music and enjoy TV without the clutter and confusion of multiple boxes, remotes, or wires," Bluesound says.

It can act as an AV receiver, too, thanks to its support for HDMI eARC and accommodation of a centre-channel speaker alongside left and right ones. Just add a subwoofer and some wireless rear modules too, and you have a full 5.1 surround system on your hands.

The 100W per channel of stereo DirectDigital amplification is an upgrade on its predecessor's 80W per channel of HybridDigital amplification, although when in a 3.1 configuration that output does drop to 80W per channel.

Bluesound claims that this new amplification technology, alongside the use of a high-efficiency, high-power gallium nitride (GaN) semiconductor, and upgrades in circuitry design elsewhere, results in "virtually no distortion".

Like other Bluesound products, the new Powernode runs the BluOS multi-room streaming platform, which supports the usual suspects such as Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify, Amazon Music and Deezer, as well as PCM 24-bit/192kHz, MQA and DSD256 audio.

BluOS can also access locally stored media and internet radio, while Dirac Live Ready is also onboard the streaming amplifier for room correction and audio tuning.

For more information, contact Amber Technology on (0) 2 9998 7600 or visit www.ambertech.com.au

Abbey Road in your home

Bowers & Wilkins has pulled the cloth off the 801 Abbey Road Limited Edition loudspeakers in celebration of its 45-year partnership with the iconic London studio.

The special new model is, from what I can tell, largely a snazzy Studio-inspired spruce on the 2023-released flagship 801 D4 Signature floorstanders, the best speaker Bowers & Wilkins has made to date.

The British speaker brand says the cabinet's vintage walnut finish has been inspired by the traditional interior of the studios, as well as the musical instruments that have naturally played a huge part in Abbey Road's storied 94-year history. Meanwhile, the complementary bespoke red 'Leather by Connolly' trim is a nod to both the aesthetic of the world-famous control room in Studio Two and the red leather chairs used throughout the building.

The 801 Abbey Road Limited Edition also feature a commemorative rear faceplate that indicates their limited-edition (140 pairs only) status, while a "specially commissioned" book detailing the history of the two brands and their collaboration also comes in the package.

Indeed, as the story goes, that collaboration started back in 1980 when John Bowers took his then-new 801 speaker to Abbey Road to demonstrate how it had been designed for both domestic hi-fi and pro-studio use.

The engineers were clearly impressed, presumably by the sound the speakers delivered as much as their distinct-looking cake-tier driver arrangement, as the studio became the first to use them. Since then, six successive 800 Series generations have called Abbey Road home. You'll have to read the rest in the book…

The 801 Abbey Road Limited Edition are available to order now for $100,000 per pair.

For more information, contact Masimo Consumer on 1300 627466 or visit www.bowerswilkins.com/en-au/

WiiM and Pro-Ject partner

It's no secret that WiiM's streaming products have taken the hi-fi world by storm in recent years. The features and performance they pack into compact, affordable boxes are impressive, but the true secret of their success lies in the company's operating system and streaming platform. The WiiM Home control app — crucial to the streaming experience — is well designed and easy to use for both hi-fi novices and seasoned audiophiles, and the platform itself is terrifically robust.

It's little wonder, then, why Pro-Ject has decided to tap into WiiM's software expertise for its new streaming amplifier, the Uni Box S3, while bringing its own analogue expertise to the amplifier side. Pro-Ject and WiiM share the same distributor in the UK (although not in Australia; Pro-Ject is distributed by Interdyn and WiiM by Audacity here), so perhaps the collaboration isn't entirely random — but it is a smart move.

The Pro-Ject Uni Box S3 is based on the same dual-mono architecture analogue design as that of the company's MaiA S3 integrated amplifier, offering 40W per channel into 4 ohms (or 23W per channel into 8 ohms). Here, Pro-Ject promises to "preserve the rich character of analogue sound by keeping the analogue signal path intact." It also says that any source connected to the analogue inputs remains analogue throughout, with no extra digital conversion marring the signal.

The preamp and power amp sections are kept fully analogue, while the manufacturer has supposedly "taken great care to integrate the streaming input with clear separation of analogue and digital devices". Pro-Ject claims that by keeping the analogue and streaming elements separate, the Uni Box S3 can continue to function as an analogue system if the streaming technology ever becomes obsolete.

Connectivity is ample from this compact unit, too, allowing you to connect a CD player, turntable, TV and a pair of headphones. Specifically, you get a moving-magnet phono stage, a dedicated headphone amplifier with a 6.3mm output, RCA line-level, optical and coaxial inputs, and an HDMI eARC input. There is also a subwoofer output.

Wi-fi and Bluetooth 5.1 are both on the menu, while naturally the WiiM platform is a gateway to Qobuz, Tidal (Connect), Spotify (Connect), Deezer, Amazon Music, TuneIn internet radio, and many others.

Instead of using the ESS Sabre DAC adopted by many streaming products nowadays, the Uni Box S3 instead uses a Cirrus Logic CS4344 DAC, which can handle PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz.

Also new is the Pro-Ject Home app, which is very similar in design to WiiM's Home app, allowing you to adjust EQ settings and control multi-room features and playback across other connected Pro-Ject units.

The Pro-Ject Uni Box S3 streaming amplifier is available now in black or silver finishes, and costs $1,520, so a fair bit more than WiiM's $699 Amp Pro.

For more information, contact Interdyn on (03) 9426 3600 or visit www.interdyn.com.au

Modern, miniature desktop delights

Ruark Audio's MR1 MK3 have been a long time coming. The MR1 model has been a standout in the powered desktop speaker market for years, from the first-generation MR1 released in 2013 to the MR1 MK2 that launched in 2017. These petite, richly textured and musical compact speakers are highly attractive for their winning combination of size, features and price.

A third iteration is finally here, and while it keeps much of what has made the model so likeable over the years, it is furnished with plenty of upgrades while keeping the price sensible.

The handcrafted wood cabinets are now a little bit bigger to accommodate a new 8.5cm NS+ mid/bass driver, which promises "deeper, more controlled bass". The crossover and bass-reflex system have also been extensively optimised and tuned to deliver, says Ruark, "a significant leap in acoustic performance".

The 20mm silk dome tweeter remains the same, but the speakers are now powered by Class D amplifiers, adapted from those used in the company's R410 all-in-one wireless system. That's a departure from the Class A/B amplifiers used in the outgoing MR1 MK2, with Ruark stating that Class D amps offer a "substantial increase in power output and control".

The feature set has been expanded, too. As before, the MR1 remain Bluetooth-only speakers (there's no wi-fi or integrated Spotify Connect here), but the codec support has improved this time round to include the higher-quality aptX HD, plus low-latency support. There is also a combined optical and auxiliary input, with USB-C and phono inputs being the new additions for easy connectivity to a phone, laptop, TV and even a turntable.

You can also plug in a subwoofer (Ruark would point you to its own RS1 Subwoofer) for extra low-end heft.

The Ruark MR1 MK3 come in a choice of two finishes — rich walnut or charcoal lacquer — with slate grey fabric grilles, while the top-mounted rotary dial (a real design highlight) returns, too. They are available now for $899.

For more information, contact Synergy Audio Visual on (03) 9459 7474 or visit www.synergyaudio.com

Classic Quad DNA

Following Quad's launch of its two-box 33/303 amplifier pairing, which revived classic models from the 1960s with a fresh outlook, the manufacturer now introduces the Quad 3 integrated amplifier, which follows the same styling cues as its reimagined siblings but delivers "cutting-edge" internals under that attractive retro hood.

The Quad 3 is powered by Class A/B amplification and delivers 65 watts per channel into 8 ohms. The amp's output stage uses Quad's Complementary Feedback topology in pursuit of “superior linearity and excellent thermal stability,” while independent low-noise power supplies are provided for each critical element for a more "detailed, expansive and expressive" sound.

At the heart of the new amplifier is a DAC stage based around the ES9038Q2M Sabre chip. Employing ESS Technology's HyperStream II architecture and a bespoke jitter eliminator, it promises ultra-low noise and high dynamic range for an expressive and involving listen.

The 3 amp is capable of handling PCM files all the way up to 32-bit/768kHz, and DSD512 as well as full MQA decoding are also onboard. A choice of five filter settings allows you to personalise the output to suit your given source material — a handy addition if you need to make adjustments for a range of different digital formats and platforms.

In terms of physical connections, the Quad 3 offers coaxial, optical and USB Type-B inputs, plus an HDMI ARC port for integrating the amp into your TV or home cinema setup. Analogue sources, meanwhile, are catered for by twin RCA inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage.

For personal listening, you get a 6.3mm headphone output, while Bluetooth 5.1 with aptX HD codec support is available for wireless streaming convenience.

On the front panel are four controls for selecting your source and adjusting your music's tone to your preference, alongside a larger volume rotary control dial and, of course, that retro-tastic orange backlit horizontal LCD display. The Quad 3 is available now, priced at $2,999.

For more information, contact AV Revolution on (02) 9521 4844 or visit www.avrevolution.com.au

TRIANGLE
MANUFACTURE ELECTROACOUSTIQUE

BOREA

BR04 - Light Oak Blue

The New BR04

was crafted to enhance the BR03, offering superior performance while maintaining a compact, affordable design. These efforts provide upgraded performance, especially in the bass, while retaining the qualities that made the BOREA range successful.

audio marketing

Bigger Pop Divas

Focal impressed last year with its hugely talented, high-end Diva Utopia wireless active speakers, which pack streaming, amplification and great sound into a pair of distinctively styled stereo speakers. Clearly, there has been enough interest in that luxurious $59,000 system to have allowed Focal to go even bigger, more powerful and pricier with this concept. Enter the Diva Mezza Utopia, priced at… $110,000!

According to the French brand, the Mezza "represents a significant leap forward in Focal's pursuit to redefine home hi-fi, where uncompromising sound meets intuitive ease of use". While sporting the same aesthetic as their sibling, complete with striking swappable side panels that can be interchanged with other materials and finishes, these newcomers are bigger, their cabinet volume 62 litres compared to the Utopia's 50-litre enclosures. The speakers can work in rooms up to 100m² in size.

The Mezza system features a "completely re-engineered" Naim Audio electronics package as the brawn and brains of the system. A dual-stage power supply provides "exceptional dynamics and precision power management" across the frequency range, while three Class A/B amplifiers power the drivers: 90W goes to Focal's inverted 'M' beryllium tweeter, 130W to the 6.5in (16.5cm) midrange driver, and 280W to the four 8in (20.5cm) 'W' cone woofers, which work in a push-pull configuration, with two on either side of each speaker.

That's a staggering 500W of power per tower — 25% up from the Utopia's rating. The heatsink on the Mezza is more substantial to deal with the increase in power and heat, too. As before, there is a downward-firing port and a rather substantial base.

The Diva Mezza Utopia use Naim's streaming platform, with all aspects controlled through the existing app. The streaming module has been updated, delivering supposedly greater bandwidth and more capability to account for new streaming features.

All the popular and major streaming apps and protocols that were supported in Utopia — UPnP, Bluetooth, AirPlay 2, Google Cast and Tidal Connect — are also available this time round.

The Mezza also continue to use Ultra Wideband (UWB) technology to wirelessly and losslessly transmit audio up to 24-bit/96kHz between the speakers. Those employing a wired connection can enjoy full-fat 24-bit/192kHz quality, however.

For more information, contact Westan at (03) 9541 8888 or visit www.westan.com.au

More accessible high-end

Wilson Audio has redesigned its most compact and accessible (take that latter adjective with a pinch of salt!) floorstanders, the Sabrina.

One of the main improvements for the new Sabrina V is a new H-Material for the front baffle. This is supposedly similar to Wilson Audio's inflexible X-Material (used in the outgoing SabrinaX), but a little softer, which the company says helps to produce a more musical midrange.

Wilson Audio hasn't jettisoned its X-Material completely, mind you. The Sabrina V use it in their outer panels and structural reinforcement to give their enclosures more mechanical stiffness. In turn, it also enhances vibration control, sharpens imaging and lowers the acoustic noise floor.

The new floorstanders also borrow driver technologies from higher-end Wilson Audio speakers: the Convergent Synergy Carbon (CSC) tweeter comes from the Alexx V; the 7-inch AlNiCo (Aluminum/Nickel/Cobalt) QuadraMag midrange drive unit was originally developed for the Chronosonic XVX; and the 8-inch woofer is also seen in the Sasha V and The WATT/Puppy.

The Sabrina V's crossover contains the company's uniquely wound AudioCapX-WA capacitors, created using its custom machines and finished by hand. They promise "exceptional low-level resolution and tonal subtleties" that rival crossover designs supposedly lose.

A newly engineered copper version of that capacitor — first seen in the Sasha V speakers, and now with a copper-end spray — should improve high-frequency detail and spatial clarity, too. And a new woofer capacitor, "structurally aligned" with the brand's midrange capacitor, supposedly ensures a seamless transition from low to mid frequencies, too.

The Sabrina's rear bass port and midrange vent has been refined to reveal deeper and more natural low frequencies, while new rear-panel resistor access makes the speaker easier to service and tune.

Indeed, if you haven't gauged by now, pretty much every aspect of the Sabrina's design has been engineered for the V to take sound quality to new heights over their predecessor.

Standing just under a metre tall and available in dozens of colour combinations and finishes, the Wilson Audio Sabrina V are available now for $49.995.

For more information, contact Advance Audio on (02) 9561 0799 or visit www.advanceaudio.com.au

Benchmark streaming… minus the DAC

Network transports are having a bit of a moment. It is widely understood that music streamers integrate a DAC — but what if you already have a perfectly good (or very good indeed) DAC in your hi-fi system chain and just want to add streaming powers without doubling up? That's where a network transport (also referred to as a ‘streaming transport’ or ‘network streaming bridge’) comes in, and high-end streaming specialist Lumin has just announced a new flagship model in the form of the U2X, priced at $18,200.

Featuring key technologies derived from the company's flagship X1 music streamer, the new U2X promises to "meet the demands of audiophiles seeking pristine sound quality and seamless functionality".

The U2X supposedly delivers a "significant boost" in processing power over its U1X predecessor thanks to its use of the company's most advanced, high-speed System-on-Chip processor, which was launched in 2022. This allows for better real-time handling of hi-res files and enhanced upsampling.

Also included is a high-precision 10MHz clock, allowing the U2X to be used as either a master or slave clock through its 10MHz single input and two outputs. This unusual feature (at this price level) is useful if your system includes external master clocks or multiple digital devices that require precise synchronisation, allowing one unit to dictate the timing for the other units. Lumin says this helps to "enhance audio accuracy and fidelity," as well as minimise jitter by ensuring that all devices are working to a consistent timing reference.

The network transport's file support is extensive: it plays ball with PCM audio up to 32-bit/768kHz and native DSD512, alongside DSD256 up/down sampling and even MQA.

Digital outputs include single optical, two coaxial (RCA and BNC sockets) and AES-EBU connections. One of the three USB ports is isolated from the noisy network, while the other two are free for music storage. Standard Ethernet and optical fibre network ports are available to facilitate a wired connection, too.

Thanks to UPnP compatibility, the U2X can access your digital audio library stored on connected NAS drives. Streaming features, meanwhile, include Tidal Connect, Qobuz Connect and Spotify Connect, as well as TuneIn internet radio and AirPlay. The Lumin is also Roon Ready and Audirvana certified.

All streaming functionality and connected music libraries can be managed and browsed by the comprehensive Lumin app, which has also been updated recently to offer simpler view options on your phone or alternative control device.

As with Lumin's other flagship machines, the U2X and its accompanying external power supply are housed in a chassis that is CNC-machined from a solid block of aluminium, with thick walls providing ultimate rigidity and isolation from unwanted interference.

The low-noise external supply separates the digital processing elements from the analogue components, while also maintaining a clean signal path for 'optimal' sonic performance.

For more information, contact Audio Magic on (03) 9489 51 22 or visit www.audiomagic.com.au

LEGO-like hi-fi

Prototypes of Chord Electronics' Suzi Pre pre-amplifier and Suzi Amp power amplifier first appeared at last year's High End Munich show, their LEGO-like modular forms designed to work on their own, or together in a compact stereo pre/power combo, or in conjunction with some of Chord's existing digital products. A whole year later, the two premium analogue amps are now officially available to buy, the Suzi Pre costing $4,000 and the Suze Amp priced at $7,000.

The Suzi Pre is, as the name suggests, a preamp. It integrates a moving-magnet phono stage as well as a headphone amplifier feeding 3.5mm and 6.3mm sockets. There are also three RCA line-level inputs, a single RCA output, an AV bypass function, and that trademark colour-changing button (or "polychromatic sphere," as Chord calls it) for adjusting volume and selecting inputs.

The Suzi Amp, meanwhile, is a 30 watts-per-channel power amp that boasts amplification technology derived from Chord Electronics' flagship Ultima range.

Both Suzi units feature the British company's rather sci-fi-looking metal and colourful buttons aesthetic, looking rather like mini versions of the Ultima flagships, or natural-born partners for Chord's Hugo 2 DAC and 2go streamer. Which makes sense…

While each Suzi can be partnered with kit from other manufacturers, their modular design allows for three logical Chord-centric partnerships: Suzi Pre with Suzie Amp, Suzi Amp with Hugo 2, and Suzi Amp with Hugo 2 and 2go. The flat covering on the top section of the Amp can be removed to allow the Pre to snugly slot in, for example, if you want to use both in a high-end, desktop-friendly pre/power pairing.

Alternatively, if you want to bring digital functionality into the equation, you can instead slot in the Hugo 2 DAC, which also fits neatly into the Amp's dimensions.

Chord also offers a separately sold ‘USB Multiplexer’ expansion accessory, which adds two additional inputs — a USB Type-B for data and a USB-C for both data and charging — when plugged into the Hugo 2's Micro USB input. You can discuss this option with Chord Electronics' Australian distributor, Radiance AV.

The Suzi Amp also comes with a charging bridge so that the battery-powered Hugo 2 is always charged up when connected, even when the Suzi is turned off. Finally, you can add the Chord 2go streaming module to the Suzi Amp and Hugo 2 combination to bring hi-res DLNA streaming and up to 4TB storage to this unique modular hi-fi setup.

For more information, contact Radiance Audio Visual at (02) 9659 1117 or visit www.radianceav.com.au

Luxury for less

In a break from tradition, high-end German manufacturer Clearaudio is targeting a more accessible tranche of the hi-fi market with its latest affordable turntable. Clearaudio currently has decks on its books that will set you back $227,000, but its new Compass turntable clocks in at a far more reasonable $2,599.

Aiming to bring Clearaudio's considerable expertise in the field of big-money turntables to a more democratised price point, the belt-driven deck uses precision-milled components and premium materials for more "accessible performance without compromise".

At the heart of the turntable is a precision bearing combined with a specially manufactured platter and sub-platter, crafted for greater stability and less noise or unwanted vibrations that could affect your vinyl's performance.

The chassis comprises medium-density wood fibre, with a steel bottom plate designed to add further weight and security.

Driven by its resonance-damped DC motor, the Compass is capable of playing at 33⅓ and 45rpm speeds via an electronic changer. It also comes equipped with the recently unveiled N1 moving-magnet cartridge, as well as the also-new T1 tonearm, which derives from the brand's more premium Satisfy arm.

Designed to be a compact and easy-to-use turntable, the Compass comes equipped with a detachable acrylic lid and plug-in power supply.

According to Robert Suchy, Clearaudio's CEO, "Clearaudio has always stood for uncompromising quality and exceptional design. Now we are welcoming a wider audience for our high-end technology with Compass: a ready-to-play turntable delivering a vinyl-listening experience that exceeds expectations in this price range."

The Clearaudio Compass is available to pre-order now in either silver or black, with stock expected to arrive in early September.

For more information, contact BusiSoft AV on (03) 9810 2900 or visit www.busisoft.com.au

New from the noise-cancelling kings

Bose has unveiled its latest pair of flagship wireless earbuds, the catchily named (*not*!) QuietComfort Ultra Earbuds (2nd Gen). Quite apart from having a mouthful of a name, Bose's new buds aim to build upon the success of their predecessors, which were released back in September 2023 and received critical acclaim for their active noise cancellation (ANC) and sound abilities. Two years on, the QC Ultra Earbuds 2nd Gen promise the "same iconic performance," along with updates to its wireless charging and noise-cancelling and voice call quality.

Let's start with the "enhanced" ANC upgrades. As before, the QC Ultra Earbuds (2nd Gen) use Bose's proprietary and class-leading CustomTune sound calibration technology, which adapts the audio and noise cancelling to the listener's ears and surroundings.

In the second-gen earbuds, an updated algorithm is layered on top of this existing technology, aiming to improve this 'ActiveSense' experience when in Aware (transparency/passthrough) Mode.

Bose claims that "changes in noise cancellation levels are now smoother than before when the system is adjusting to filter out sudden spikes of noise, preventing audio content from being drowned out by the sound of a passing train or a nearby siren".

A new AI-powered noise suppression system, combined with the earbuds' eight microphones, is set to deliver clearer voice calls, too. Bose claims that the latest earbuds are more effective at reducing background noises, like wind or office chatter, while keeping the speaker's voice clear and centred. This should work whether you're using one earbud or both.

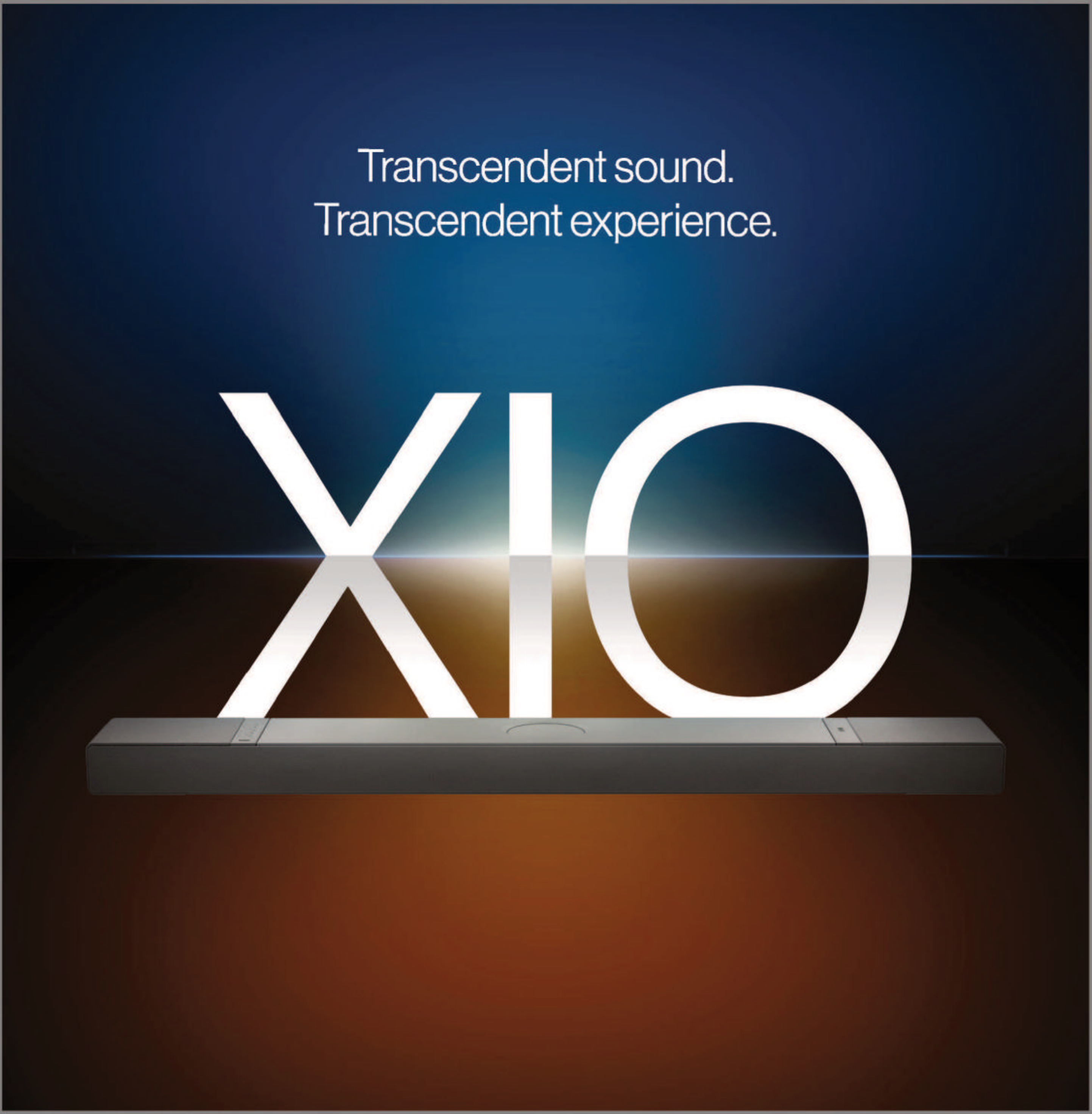
The general design of the earbuds hasn't changed, but Bose has upgraded the eartips that come included in the box. They now have a guard to prevent wax build-up over time, which also makes it easier to clean the eartips. They also feature wireless charging out of the box.

Other elements of the Bose QC Ultra Earbuds remain the same as the previous generation, which is no bad thing. The buds run on Bluetooth 5.3, with Multipoint connectivity available for seamless switching between two connected devices. The standard AAC and SBC codecs are supported, alongside aptX Adaptive, which allows you to stream in relatively sonically decent and low-latency quality from compatible sources. There's no sign of Auracast support, but Bose's divisive take on spatial audio, Immersive Audio, returns.

The Bose QC Ultra Earbuds (2nd Gen) have the same battery life as before: six hours on a single charge, with Immersive Audio usage slashing that number to four. You get three additional charges with the USB-C charging case, resulting in a 24-hour total of battery life. That's on par with the current Sony WF-1000XM5, although you do get longer total hours from Apple and Technics' flagships.

The Bose QuietComfort Ultra Earbuds (2nd Gen) are available in black or white smoke finishes alongside a limited-edition deep plum colourway, priced at $450.

For more information visit www.bose.com.au



XIO - Much more than just a soundbar.

XIO takes KEF's HiFi legacy and redefines what is possible in a soundbar. With bespokeinnovations including Uni-Q® MX for detailed, room-filling sound, and VECO (Velocity Control Technology) for pristine clarity, XIO is a wireless High-Fidelity Spatial Audio system delivering a truly transcendent cinematic experience. Powered by 5.1.2 configuration and Music Integrity Engine® for Cinema, XIO pulls you into the heart of every scene, every moment, every melody.

*Additional wireless surround feature with KEF wireless speakers will be available in Autumn 2025

KEF Listen and believe

Explore More

Silent Angel Bremen SL1 Plus

Streamer/DAC

- Silent operation
- Superb sound
- Great looks

- No headphone output
- No SPDIF input
- App-only control

RRP **$1,690**

Given that Silent Angel names its products after German cities — Bremen, in the case of the SL1P being reviewed here, but other models bear the names Munich, Rhein and Bonn — one could be forgiven for thinking the company is German. It isn't.

As well as being manufactured in Zhuhai city, Guangdong, China, Silent Angel products are also designed in China, under the leadership of Dr Huang Jian and Chorus Chuang, who in 2014 founded Thunder Data (Zhuhai) Co. Ltd, of which Silent Angel is a subsidiary. According to Huang Jian, the company's aim is "to provide customers with high-performance storage, small and medium enterprises and home network storage, digital music resource management and playback for hi-fi audiophiles".

While for the sake of brevity I will refer to the Bremen SL1P Plus as simply the 'SL1P' for the rest of this review the model name is something of a misnomer, because the word 'Bremen' does not appear on the unit itself or its packaging, and the 'P' in the name apparently stands for 'Plus', so the unit should either be called the 'SL1 Plus' or just simply the 'SL1P.' Indeed, Google the model and you will find that different websites list it under different names.

THE EQUIPMENT

The SL1P's front panel is nothing if not austere: nothing decorates it other than the model number, whose font initially made me read it as 'SLIP' rather than 'SL1P'. Perhaps this was a deliberate reference to one or more of the common meanings of 'slip', which include: 'to move, flow, pass, or go smoothly or easily; glide; and slide.'

Not even an LED blesses the front panel to indicate whether or not the streamer is powered up. Instead, Silent Angel has put that LED underneath the chassis, relying on the light from it being reflected from whatever surface the unit is sitting on. The light's colour (either blue or green, depending on the SL1P's operational status) and its intensity are rather dependent on that surface, then.

So how do you control the SL1P? It's all done using Silent Angel's own VitOS App, available on Android and iOS devices. According to the company's website, three versions of the app exist — Manager, Orbiter and Lite, but I couldn't find that last one on the Android app store. Indeed, Thunder Data seems to have discontinued Lite, which was intended for use with the B1, B1T, and B2.

The Orbiter version is the one designed to be used with the SL1P. With it, says Silent Angel, you can 'easily locate and set up a new device, browse and stream music. Listen to all your favourite songs with displayed details such as bitrate, sample rate, bit depth and format (e.g. DSD, WAV or FLAC).'

As you have hopefully gathered from all this app talk, the Silent Angel SL1P is a music streamer (which the industry has come to define as a network streamer *with* an integrated DAC; those without built-in DACs are commonly referred to as 'network transports'). This Silent Angel streamer has been designed to enable stable, jitter-free music streaming via both wired and wi-fi connections. Despite being a new product, it is based on the brand's successful entry-level B1 and B2 streamers released several years ago, although note that whereas those models had Bluetooth onboard, the SL1P does not.

The SL1P's DAC can handle pretty much the entire gamut of readily available digital audio formats, including MQA, PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz, and DSD audio (which can either be converted to PCM or handled via DoP i.e. DSD over PCM). If, for any reason, you need to convert even higher PCM sample rates than the SL1P's own DAC can manage, you can use one of the streamer's digital outputs to drive an external DAC that *can* accommodate that.

As for compatibility with streaming services, the SL1P supports Tidal Connect, Qobuz, HighResAudio, Spotify Connect and AirPlay 2, plus all available internet radio stations. It will also function as a DLNA Renderer, in which scenario it is compatible with third-party DLNA apps JPlay and mConnect (and likely others, but I only checked those two).

As well as connecting to your network via Ethernet or wi-fi, the SL1P also offers two USB inputs, allowing you to plug in up to two USB sticks, NAS drives or SSD devices containing music files. If you use an SSD, it should be self-powered, because the maximum current capacity of the SL1P's USB socket is 100mA, and exceeding this could damage the streamer. However, since 1TB USB keys are now commonplace and very affordable, it's likely many owners would be able to store all their 'local' music on two USBs. The streamer's outputs, meanwhile, include two USBs, SPDIF (Toslink and RCA) and analogue (unbalanced RCA or balanced XLR). It would have been nice for Silent Angel to include an SPDIF digital input, but it's hardly a deal-breaker.

All the connectors enabling these plug-in options are very nicely laid out along the rear panel, along with a mains power switch, a fused 240V socket and a connector labelled 'SA-LINK', which facilitates the SL1P's connection to other Silent Angel products.

> The SL1P also offers two USB inputs, allowing you to plug in up to two USB sticks, NAS drives or SSD

SET-UP AND OPERATION

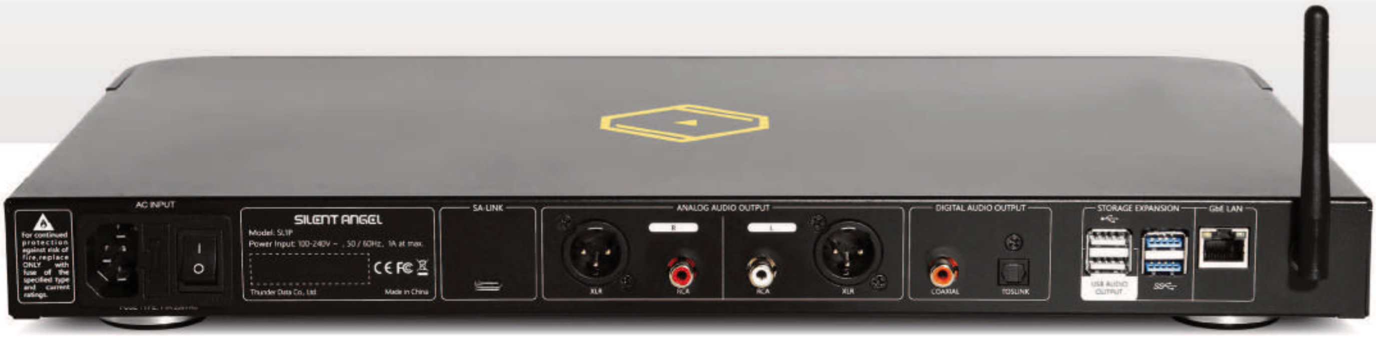
The SL1P comes packaged with all the cables you need to get up and running, together with a nicely produced 'Quick-Start Guide'. Most of this guide is well laid-out and easy to follow, although the section on how to connect to your device and wireless network (if you're using wi-fi, that is) is provided via images of a phone screen that are so small I had to pull out a magnifying glass to see what I was supposed to do… then again, my eyesight isn't the best! I later discovered the same guide is available to download from Silent Angel's website (www.silentangel.com), allowing me to enlarge it on my screen.

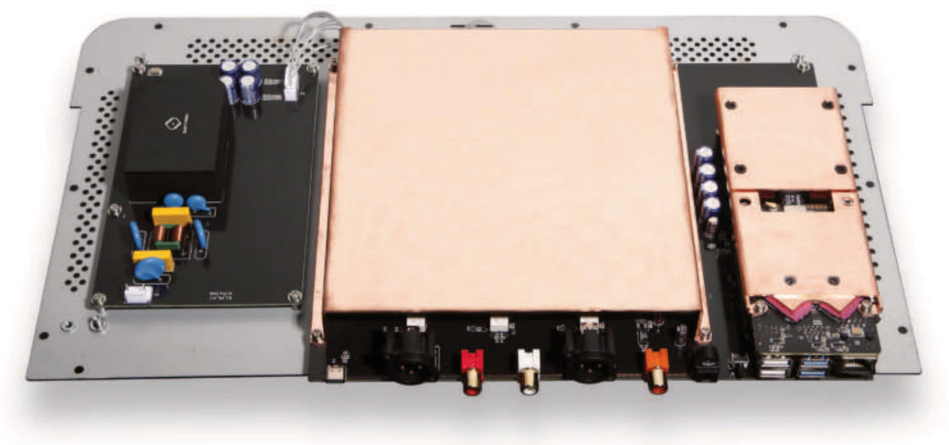
My install had a hiccup right at the start because the VitOS Orbiter app refused to load onto my Samsung Note 10 phone. My phone initially told me the app 'has a bug, try clearing the app's cache first and then re-open', and then after I had done as it suggested, again refused to load, telling me this time around that 'this app has a bug. Try updating this app after its developer provides a fix for this error.' I had better luck when I downloaded Orbiter onto my Lenovo Chromebook — the install was totally error-free.

I primarily use my own personal music sources when evaluating hi-fi components, as this is almost exclusively what I do in real life. These are classed as 'Local' sources in the app. Here, I could choose whether to send music to the USB, SPDIF or analogue outputs. Each has its own control panel so that you can configure parameters such as maximum sample rate and bit depth, volume control on/off, and so on. It's also possible to configure how the app displays song metadata.

In this 'Local' mode, you then click the '?' button alongside 'Local Music Information' to enter an interface that displays the number of songs stored, their total playing time, and the last time the data was updated. The scan time to load all this information will depend on how much music you have, but once it's scanned it won't need to rescan until you load additional music onto your local drive(s).

I found that the Orbiter app responded quite quickly to commands from my Chromebook, though I found the 'Search' tool (which I sometimes use to locate a specific artist, song or album, predominantly when I've forgotten something I need in order to properly identify the specific track I wish to hear) to be rather rudimentary. Although the Orbiter app is satisfactory in that it does what you





need it to do (find and play music!), it isn't what I'd call 'slick' or even totally intuitive. While it's easy to, say, create and manage playlists, it isn't quite as straightforward as I would have liked. The app also didn't appear to be totally bulletproof: the screen would sometimes freeze and/or lock on 'Find Device', while at other times icons simply disappeared. I suspect these issues were down to me using a Chromebook rather than a phone or tablet, which highlights the fact that if you're planning to buy an SL1P, you should make sure it's compatible with the device you're planning to control it with, not least as, unlike some streamers, which can be controlled from the front panel, a supplied remote or via a web interface, the SL1P must be controlled by either a Thunderdata app or, as I stated previously, third-party software.

You can get a feel in advance for how the Orbiter app works by reading the user manual (parts 1 and 2), accessible via links at https://silentangel.com/app/#vitosorbiter

LISTENING SESSIONS

Once music was playing, everything panned out beautifully. The sound from the Silent Angel streamer was everything I wanted it to be. For a start, the streamer lives up to its manufacturer's name because it is completely silent — there's no noise from hard drives or cooling fans. Nor was there any background noise during music playback — silences were truly silent, with no hiss or hum audible through my loudspeakers, irrespective of volume level.

Stereo imaging was perfect, a trait which was evidenced when playing Tracy Chapman's *Give Me One Reason* from her fourth studio album, New Beginning, which has the vocals, drums and guitars placed consistently right across the stereo stage. The sound of the solo guitar, just to the left of centre, is so focused that it comes as a real acoustic surprise when Chapman's vocal kicks in at stage centre. Shortly after, the drummer enters the arrangement, and the kit is very obviously behind where Chapman is standing, and you can also hear the precise *placement* of the various drums and cymbals. The lead guitar breaks at stage right flesh out the arrangement, which includes background vocals and electric organ. Impressively, the SL1P's entire rendition was completely clean and enormously dynamic.

As an aside, I found it more than curious that despite being a huge hit in Australia and the US, reaching #3 in both countries' charts, *Give Me One Reason* only just managed to creep into the top 100 list in the UK, charting right down at #95. Of course, those were pre-Spotify times; had the streaming service been around back then (and not, in fact, more than a decade later), its UK reception might well have been different. Indeed, it would be interesting to discover how Spotify has influenced musical tastes around the world.

I then tested the SL1P's ability to deliver deep bass and musical immersion with Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon, which always gets a spin when I'm reviewing hi-fi, and not only because it's a great album for testing but also because I just like listening to it. It's one of the few albums I never tire of hearing. Once again, the SL1P delivered top-notch sound quality, particularly the sound effects of the various coins, cash register and tearing paper sounds on *Money*. The famous 'heartbeat' sound (it isn't one, of course) that introduces and closes out the album was clearly and precisely delineated by the SL1P, and Clare Torry's wordless vocal on *Great Gig in the Sky* was as emotive as I've ever heard it.

There is a lot of high-frequency information on DSotM, and I was already happy with the SL1P's performance in this regard, but I often use Stevie Wonder's wonderful *Superstition* as a backup for testing treble. I just love the sound of the depthy Moog bass line against the picky sound of Wonder's Hohner clavinet. One of my favourite musical memories is hearing him live during one of his tours here in Australia. The fabulous and unforgettable riff from this song was apparently improvised and is, according to James E. Perone, Emeritus Professor of Music at Mount Union College, 'probably Wonder's most memorable use of the minor pentatonic scale'.

CONCLUSION

Silent Angel's new Bremen SL1 Plus is a great-sounding, great-looking and all-round high-quality music streamer that handles more file types than many other streamers in its price category.

Greg Borrowman

SPECS & CONTACT

RRP: $1,690
Warranty: 2 years
Control app: VitOS Orbiter
Inputs: wi-fi, Ethernet, 2x USB
Outputs: XLR balanced, RCA unbalanced, USB, optical, coaxial
SA-Link Port: Controlled via SA-Link
Memory: 4GB
Storage: 32GB high-speed flash
SSD expansion: M.2 NVMe SSD (22*80mm), up to 4TB
Processor (CPU): Dual-core Cortex-72 at 1.8GHz + Quad-core Cortex-A53 at 1.4GHz
Chassis: Galvanised steel with an aluminium front panel
Dimensions (hwd): 5 x 4 x 2.5cm (excluding antennas)

Distributor: Absolute Hi End
T: (04) 8877 7999
E: info@absolutehiend.com
W: www.absolutehiend.com

Readers interested in a full technical appraisal of the performance of the Silent Angel SL1 Plus streamer should continue on and read the **LABORATORY TEST REPORT** published on the following pages. Readers should note that the results mentioned in the report, tabulated in performance charts and/or displayed using graphs and/or photographs should be construed as applying only to the specific sample tested.

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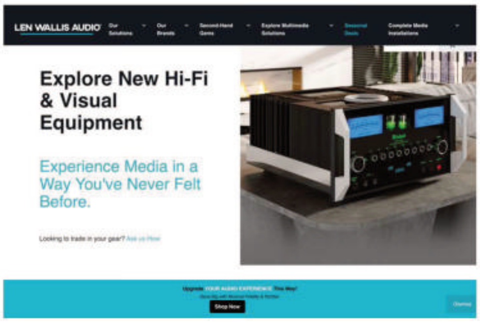
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Laboratory Test Report

According to measurements made by *Newport Test Labs* of the Silent Angel SL1P's balanced analogue outputs, they deliver around 4Vrms when the onboard digital volume control is set to 0dB. Or, more precisely, as you can tell from the tabulated results shown in the chart below, 4.0365Vrms from the left channel and 4.0574Vrms from the right channel. The lab didn't measure the voltages at the unbalanced terminals, but according to theory they would be exactly half that of the balanced outputs.

You can see that the voltages aren't exactly equal, so there's a very slight imbalance between the two channels which, if you do the maths, works out at 0.045dB, which would be imperceptible to the ear. I suspect that if you switched the digital volume control off, the balance would improve, but as I hope I've made clear, you wouldn't hear the improvement… and you would lose the usefulness of having a digital volume control.

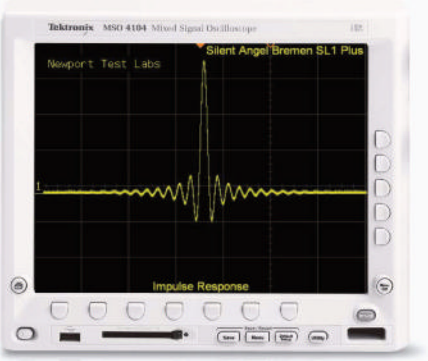
Separation between the left and right channels was absolutely excellent, as the chart also shows: 134dB at 16Hz, 144dB at 1kHz and 107dB at 20kHz… all outstandingly good results.

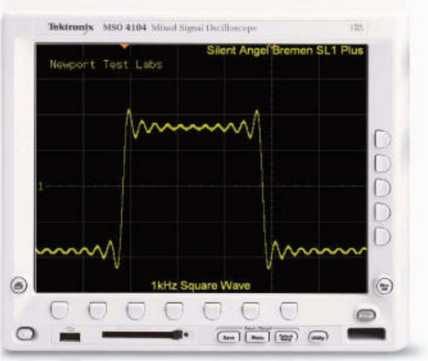
Channel phase was excellent across the board, too, but the best results were at low and midrange frequencies, with the SL1P showing just a 0.01 degree error at 16Hz, a 0.16 degree error at 1kHz and a 2.97 degree error at 20kHz. Again, these would not be audible — indeed, you would get a larger error by moving your left speaker a single millimetre closer to the listening position than the right.

Graph 1 on the following page shows total harmonic distortion (THD) when the SL1P delivers a 1kHz sine test signal at 0dBFS, which is a 'worst case' scenario, since all music will be recorded at levels that would ensure 0dB is never reached. Nonetheless, it's a good test for performance, and you can see that there's a second harmonic at –95dB (0.0017%), a third at –92dB (0.0025%), a fifth at –102dB (0.0007%), a seventh at –109dB (0.0003%), a ninth at –112dB (0.0002%) and a tenth at –118dB (0.0001%). The even higher-order components visible on this graph are all more than 130dB down, or 0.00003%.

Graph 2 shows THD at around the maximum level you would expect to find music recorded (–6dB), and you can see that output distortion levels have dropped significantly. The second-order component is reduced to –108dB (0.0003%), the third-order to –100dB (0.001%) and the fifth to –118dB (0.0001%), while all the higher-order components are more than 120dB down (0.0001%), with some approaching –130dB (0.00003%). As you can see from the percentage figures, distortion at these levels is not audible.

Graph 3 shows THD at a recorded level of –20dB, which is where most energy is likely to be with music signals, and here you can see that the reduction in distortion is dramatic, with only the second and third harmonic distortion components visible above the noise floor. The second is at –135dB (0.00001%) and the third at –120dB (0.0001%). Note also that the noise floor itself is right down at –140dB, right across the audio spectrum, including at low frequencies, down where I would normally expect to see some hum creeping in from the power supply. This graph shows that there's no noise from either the power supply or the conversion process.





Of course, a noise floor measurement is *not* a signal-to-noise ratio (a fact that seems to have eluded some audiophiles, judging by some comments I've seen posted on online forums), which is why *Newport Test Labs* always measures signal-to-noise ratios. In the case of the Silent Angel SL1P, it returned figures of –113dB unweighted, and –118dB with A-weighting. These are superb results. Your amplifier is likely to contribute more noise to the audio signal than the SL1P.

Graph 6 shows the performance at –60dB. This reveals that Thunder Data is using a conventional multi-bit oversampling DAC, and this is a typical performance for a

Silent Angel SL1 Plus Music streamer — Laboratory Test Results

Analogue Section	Result	Units/Comment
Output Voltage (Balanced Outputs)	4.0365 / 4.0574	volts (Left Ch/ Right Ch)
Frequency Response	See Graph	dB (20Hz – 20kHz)
Channel Separation	134 / 144 / 107	dB at 16Hz / 1kHz / 20kHz
THD+N	0.002	@ 1kHz @ 0dBFS
Channel Balance	0.045	@ 1kHz @ 0dBFS
Channel Phase	0.01 / 0.16 / 2.97	degrees at 16Hz / 1kHz / 20kHz
Group Delay	0.04 / 5.63	degrees (1–20kHz / 20–1kHz)
Signal-to-Noise Ratio (No Pre-emph)	113dB / 118dB	dB (unweighted/weighted)
De-Emphasis Error	Not Applicable	at 1kHz / 4kHz / 16kHz
Linearity Error @ –60.00dB / –70.00dB	0.01 / 0.05	dB (Test Signal Not Dithered)
Linearity Error @ –80.59dB / –85.24dB	0.01 / No error	dB (Test Signal Not Dithered)
Linearity Error @ –89.46dB / –91.24dB	0.03 / 0.01	dB (Test Signal Not Dithered)
Linearity Error @ –80.70dB / –90.31dB	0.08 / 0.03	dB (Test Signal Dithered)
Power Consumption	5.73	watts
Mains Voltage During Testing	235 – 246	(Minimum – Maximum)

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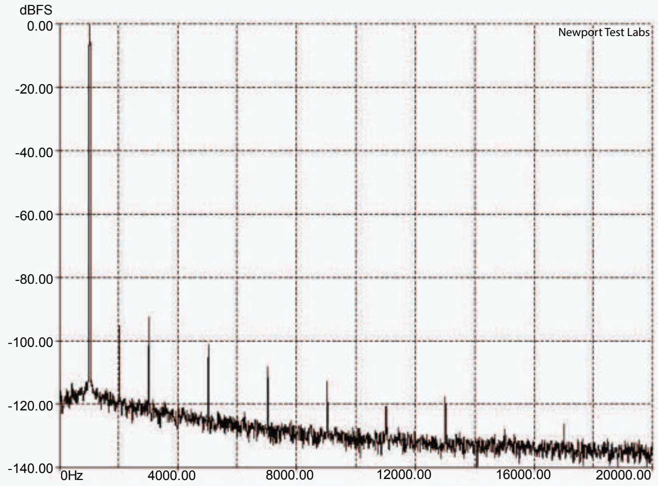
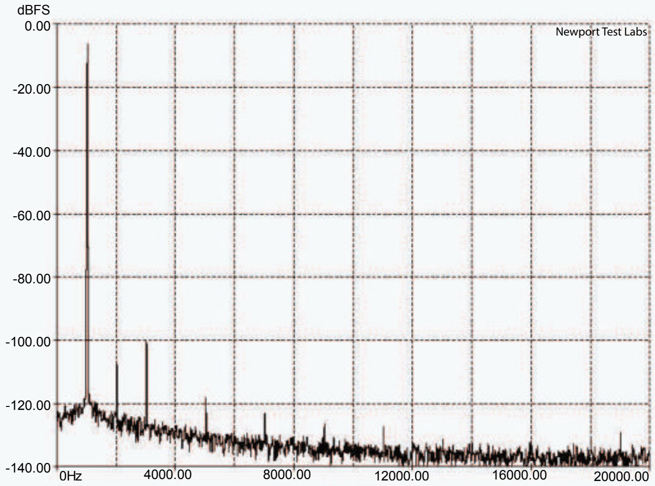
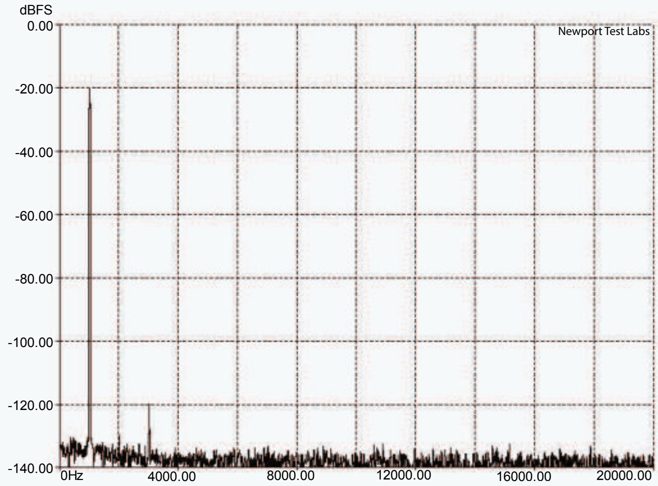


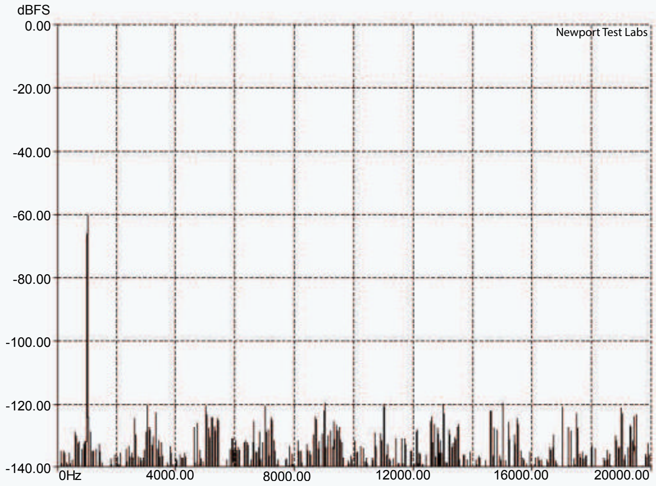
Graph 1. THD @ 1kHz, 0dBFS



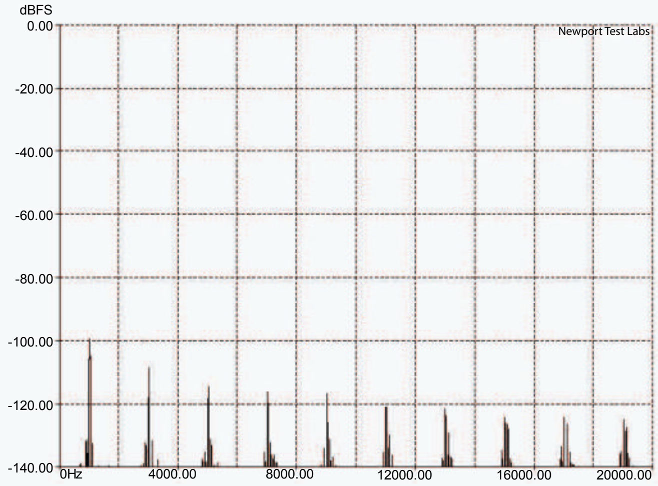
Graph 2. THD @ 1kHz, -6dBFS



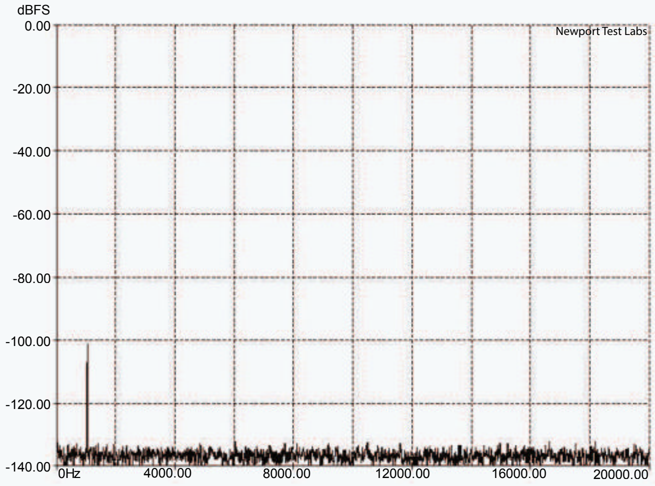
Graph 3. THD @ 1kHz, -20dBFS



Graph 4. THD @ 1kHz, -60dBFS



Graph 5. THD @ 1kHz, -100dBFS without dither

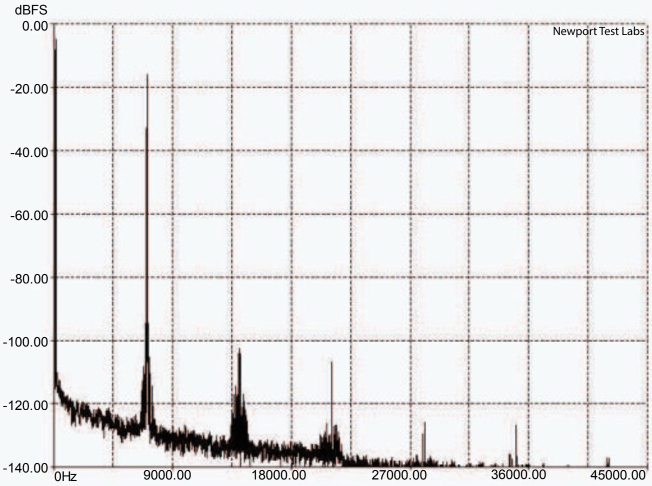


Graph 6. THD @ 1kHz, -100dBFS with dither

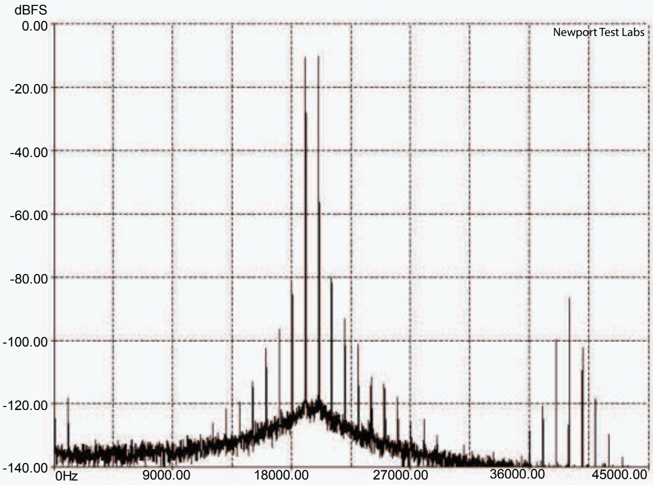
high-end DAC. The 'grass' on the noise floor is caused by quantisation errors as a result of the test signal not being dithered, as evident in Graphs 5 and 6. These graphs show exactly the same test signal at exactly the same level, but with one signal not dithered (Graph 5) and with the other signal dithered (Graph 6). As you'd expect, *all* digital music signals are therefore dithered specifically in order to remove quantisation errors, so Graph 6 is typical of the performance you could expect from the SL1P.

Intermodulation distortion was very low, as tested using the SMPTE standard and shown in Graph 7. There are some intermodulation components clustered on either side of the 7kHz signal, but they are very low in level. Tested using the CCIF standard (Graph 8), there are sidebands at 18kHz and 21kHz that are 80dB down (0.01%), and sidebands at 17kHz (–95dB/0.0017%) and 22kHz (–92dB/0.0025%). The other sidebands are more than 100dB down (0.01%). There is an unwanted regenerated 1kHz difference signal visible at the left of the graph, but since it's at –118dB (0.0001%) it can safely be ignored.

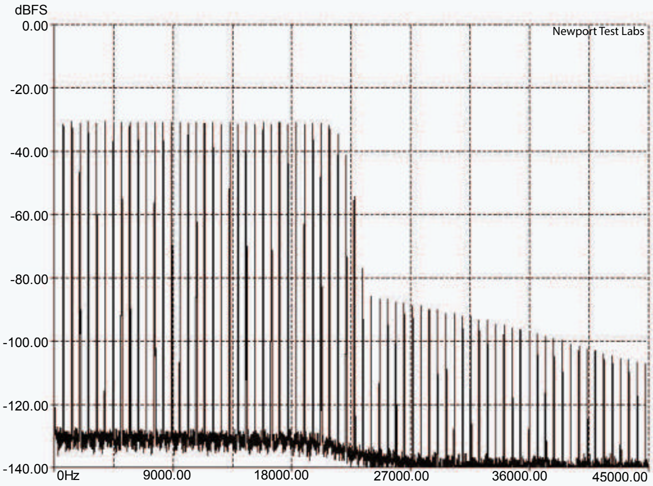
The Silent Angel SL1P's frequency response is shown in two different



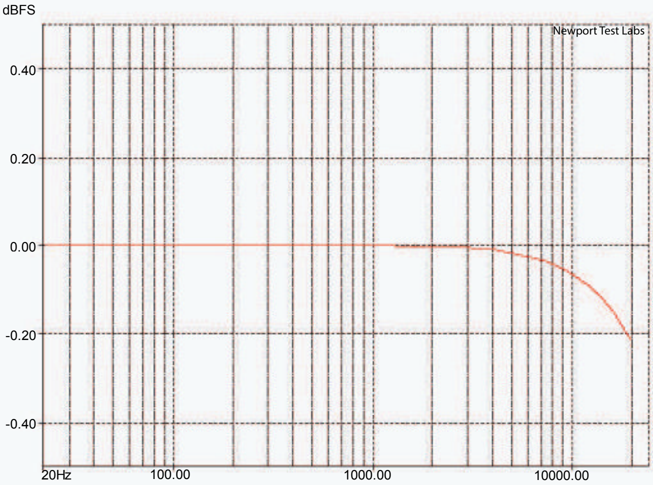
Graph 7. IMD using SMPTE 60Hz/7kHz test signal @ 0dBFS



Graph 8. IMD using CCIF 19kHz/20kHz test signals @ 0dBFS



Graph 9. Impulse response @ 0dBFS



Graph 10. Frequency response @ 0dBFS

presentations (Graphs 9 and 10). As Graph 10 is the more typical display format for this measurement, I'll address the result it shows, which is that the frequency response of the SL1P is superbly flat and linear. There is absolutely no deviation from the 0dB reference line between 20Hz and 1kHz, evoking the observation that it's 'ruler flat'. The fact that the response rolls off above 1kHz, to be 0.21dB down at 20kHz, is only obvious on this graph because of its extreme vertical scale, as you can see from the dB calibrations at its Y axis. Normalised, the response is 20Hz to 20kHz ±0.1dB.

As with most modern streamers and DACs, there is no de-emphasis circuitry in the SL1P (or, more likely, the DAC offers it, but it's not been implemented) because it's really not been needed for nigh on half a century. After all, de-emphasis is only required when playing digital music recorded prior to 1985 that had been pre-emphasised. (If you have some this old, they will still play back, but the high frequencies will be slightly boosted, so it's no big deal.) As an aside on circuit omissions, it's likely that the DAC inside the SL1P also offers multiple output filters, but the ability for the end-user to select between them has not been provided.

> I really cannot fault the technical performance... state-of-the-art results for all the tests performed

There was almost no linearity error as digital levels decreased, as you can see from the tabulated results. In fact, at –85.24dB there was no error at all: the SL1P reproduced the signal at exactly –85.24dB, hence the notation in the tabulated figures. Given that the results are so good, I would have expected slightly better results with the dithered test signals (at –80.70dB and –90.31dB), but they are still so close to perfect that the difference is essentially academic. Again, there would be no audible effect whatsoever.

The oscillograms on page 20 show the streamer's reproduction of a 1kHz square wave, and an impulse response showing the typical time-reversed ringing of an oversampling filter, with the uniformity of the reversal suggesting that Silent Angel has made no modifications to a standard (but obviously very high-performance!) off-the-shelf DAC. Looking at all the results and measurements, my guess is that Silent Angel uses a Sabre ES9069 from US company ESS Technology. This is a two-channel, 32-bit device that uses ESS's patented Hyperstream IV technology, but that's just my guess; don't take it as gospel! The impulse response also shows that the signal polarity is positive (i.e. not reversed).

As you have no doubt gathered by now, I really cannot fault the technical performance of the Silent Angel SL1P music streamer. It performed superbly, returning state-of-the-art results for all the tests performed on it by *Newport Test Labs*.

Steve Holding

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What is the point of a hi-fi system? Is it to entertain the listener with their favourite tunes, almost regardless of recording quality, or is it to deliver every bit of information on the recording as honestly as possible? If you lean towards the latter camp, then you are in for a treat with ATC's new SCM20ASL active monitors.

ATC's loudspeakers tend to have long lives by general industry standards. The standard (read: passive) SCM20 was first introduced back in 1990 and continues in production to this day, for example. While there have been a few changes along the way, with meaningful upgrades to both drive units, in essence, it remains much the same. That's no bad thing, considering just how talented these speakers are.

The first active variant was released in 1998, and the SM20ASL on test here remain remarkably faithful to that original's formula. They follow on from last year's 50th-anniversary model (pictured overpage), but miss out on the fancy paint finish and leather-covered front baffle of that limited-edition release.

DESIGN

ATC has its feet firmly planted in both professional and domestic audio camps, and unusually there is little to distinguish its products from these two sectors other than their finish. The studio speakers are typically covered in textured black paint, whereas models intended for home use tend to be clad in traditional wood veneers or more sophisticated paint finishes.

Most importantly, regardless of the target market, the speakers are voiced identically. So, when you buy a pair of SCM20ASL for your home, you will be getting the same sound as the studio engineer who uses the 'Pro' version for nearfield monitoring.

These ATCs are chunky, medium-sized two-way standmounts. They stand 45cm tall, weigh a hefty 27kg each and give off a no-nonsense functional aura that I find hugely appealing.

On paper, the combination of a 25mm soft dome and 15cm mid/bass seems pretty conventional, but these are both in-house designs that have been carefully honed to meet the company's high standards. The SH25-76S tweeter is a twin suspension design that aims to suppress mechanical rocking motion through its travel, thus reducing distortion and improving resolution. Its chunky motor system, meanwhile, is based around a large 60mm Neodymium ring magnet.

Below 2.2 kHz, the signal passes to the long-running SB75-150SL mid/bass unit. This has an unusual diaphragm that combines a 75mm dome with a 15cm cone to ensure a wide operating range and uses one of the biggest magnets I've ever seen on a driver of this type.

This drive unit alone weighs 8.4kg, which is more than many complete speakers do! The large 75mm voice coil and short coil/long magnetic gap configuration all go into making a drive unit capable of accepting high power inputs while generating low levels of distortion.

Low-frequency accuracy and lack of distortion are also reasons why ATC's engineers decided to make the SCM20 a sealed-box design rather than ported, as just about every rival is. The company claims that such a configuration leads to tauter, more agile and accurate bass, though at the cost of an earlier bass roll-off and low speaker sensitivity. The passive versions of these standmounts are rated at an uncompromising 85dB/W/m.

High Performance Active Loudspeaker

Naturally, speaker sensitivity isn't an issue for this active version. The SCM20ASL pack 250 watts of Class A/B power into each cabinet, split into a 200-watt amplifier driving the mid/bass and a 50-watt module for the tweeter. The signal is split by a 2nd order Linkwitz-Riley active crossover. Input is via a balanced XLR socket only.

Take a look at the rear of the speaker, and, next to that sole input, you will find controls for adjusting input sensitivity. These allow the speakers to be optimised for the partnering preamp or, if it has a volume control built in, source. You will also find a bass control that allows a subtle degree of bass cut and boost. These low-frequency adjustments could prove useful to optimise the speakers' performance in location, but in the 3 x 7 x 5m test room they stand in here, I find them to sound the most open, agile and natural with the rotary control set to the neutral '0' setting.

From experience I know that the drive units are capable of taking plenty of punishment without complaint

Any prospective owner will have to accept that a sealed-box design such as this is never going to be a bass monster. I'm sure ATC would be more than happy to point you towards its range of subwoofers, or one of the larger speakers in its range, if you wanted more in the way of low-end weight and authority.

BUILD QUALITY

Build quality is as formidable as you would expect from a company that manufacturers speakers designed to work hard in a studio for decades at a time. Fit and finish are good, as is the quality of the oak veneer on this review sample.

As ATC is a pretty small company, it understandably can't quite match the cosmetic slickness that industry giants such as KEF or Bowers & Wilkins manage, but I don't mind. This product, and others from this manufacturer, have an obsessive focus on performance and engineering that I can't help but love.

The SCM20ASL feels reassuringly solid, and from experience I know that the drive units are capable of taking plenty of punishment without complaint. The additional control and protection offered by active operation over a passive setup simply reinforces the speaker's ability to play loud and true without issue.

As far as positioning is concerned, I find that they work best in an equilateral triangle arrangement, as ATC recommends, angled directly towards the listener. It pays to get your ear height just right relative to the speakers, around halfway between the centre point of each driver, which optimises focus. Unusually, though, I prefer the sound with the grilles on; these monitors feel a little better balanced when used that way.

While it is tempting to put these up against a wall to maximise bass quantity, I wouldn't recommend doing so, as the loss of transparency and stereo imaging ability is too obvious.

Even if you apply a degree of bass adjustment to add more low-end emphasis, there is a cost in clarity. Best to accept these speakers for what they are and optimise for their strengths, of which there are many...

LISTENING SESSIONS

These are ruthlessly revealing performers. If you want to hear exactly what is on the recording, I can't think of an alternative that does the job better within the SCM20ASL's operating limits. These active standmounts put exactly the same magnifying glass on the rest of the system too, so if your source, preamp or cables aren't up to an appropriate standard, these monitors won't

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150 pairs of the high-gloss blue and leather-baffled SCM20ASL Limited Edition were released in 2024 for ATC's 50th anniversary

be shy about exposing the fact.

Top quality components such as the Naim ND555/555 PS DR music streamer and Burmester 088 preamp at my disposal in the test room do well, of course, and even more modest, though talented, kit like the Lindemann Limetree Bridge II/Chord Hugo TT music streamer combination or Audiolab's 9000N music streamer produce good results. Ultimately, these ATCs simply reflect the signal quality they are fed.

If that's good, then these loudspeakers are a treat. They are neutral while avoiding the sterility that many other products that aim for such a balance struggle with. The integration between the drive units is wonderfully seamless, and the speakers' character changes very little as I move away from the sweet spot, which suggests well-controlled dispersion characteristics from both drive units and a well-engineered active crossover.

The SCM20ASL's resolution of detail is astonishing. They pick up the low-level instrumental stands in Quincy Jones's Back On The Block set effortlessly and manage to arrange that mass of information into an organic and convincing whole. Voices come through with outstanding clarity and naturalness, and when the recording includes the likes of Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Chaka Khan and Ella Fitzgerald, that's a real treat. Their sense of control is absolute, where even complex tracks such as *The Places You Find Love* are delivered with unusual composure and calmness.

They are agile too, and have a firm grip on rhythms, which gives these monitors the ability to convey the ebb and flow of musical momentum well. When the music demands, they deliver it with excitement and drive. These are not speakers that add flavour in an attempt to make the recording sound better than it is; they deliver whatever the original signal has, nothing less or more. ATC's aim is honesty and transparency, and I think it has succeeded.

With 250 watts of power per channel, it would be fair to expect vivid dynamics, and within the constraints set by the cabinet and mid/bass unit size, the SCM20ASL do well. They don't have the low-end heft to rattle floorboards or convey the true scale and power of a full-blown orchestra, but they leave me in no doubt as to the musical message intended. Lows, such as they are, are taut, tuneful and beautifully textured.

These monitors image superbly, rendering a wonderfully large-scale and stable soundstage. There is absolute precision in the location of instruments and sounds, and they deliver a pleasing sense of depth on appropriate recordings. I spend a pleasurable few hours listening to Orff's Carmina Burana and Holst's Planet Suite, marvelling at the naturalness of the presentation and the way these ATCs manage to float a stereo image free from their cabinets.

CONCLUSION

As I work my way through my music collection, I'm left in no doubt about the talent of the SCM20ASL active speakers. They certainly aren't for everyone. Some will find their presentation a little cold and crave a more characterful sound. Others will certainly want more low-end extension and power, and that's fair enough, too.

But if you want to hear the recording in its unvarnished form, whether for good or bad, few alternatives get closer to that ideal than the ATC SCM20ASL.

Ketan Bharadia

SPECS & CONTACT

Type: Active sealed-box standmounts
Drive units: 25mm soft dome tweeter, 15cm mid/bass
Power: 250W per channel
Inputs: Balanced XLR
Dimensions (hwd): 45 x 25 x 41cm
Weight: 27kg
Finishes: 6 standard finishes (cherry, black ash, walnut, oak, satin black, satin white); premium options available

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Paradigm Defiance S12

Subwoofer

+
- Controlled, deep, agile bass
- Versatile system integration
- Handy wireless connectivity with app control

−
- Only one colour/finish option

RRP **$2,999**

My home cinema setups have always featured a subwoofer, either connected to an AV receiver as part of a speaker package, or in combination with a soundbar. I've even gone to great lengths to install a sub in my car. However, I have never before integrated one into my stereo hi-fi setup. I've simply never understood, nor felt, the need to add one.

I've long believed that a standalone subwoofer would hamper my listening experience by dominating — or simply not working with — the pair of speakers they are partnered with, and being another source of vibration in my wood-floored apartment, especially as I often like to crank the volume up a bit.

So when I was tasked with reviewing the Paradigm Defiance S12 for this issue, I saw it as an opportunity to finally expand my two-channel horizons to see what difference a sub could make.

It's an opportunity (and a lesson) I'm glad I took. In fact, having spent some time with the Defiance S12, I'm not sure I will ever go back to the '2.0' life...

THE EQUIPMENT

First things first, some context. The Defiance S12 is the larger of two subwoofers in Paradigm's all-new Defiance S Series. The Canadian company, whose products are distributed by Audio Active here in Australia, says its two latest sealed subs are, thanks to the components it has used (more on those shortly), "deep, right and perfectly tuned for any room" and can deliver "powerful, pinpoint accurate bass".

As its model name suggests, the Defiance S12's front-facing driver is 12 inches. The smaller Defiance S10 features a — you guessed it — 10-inch bass driver. In both cases a grille is attached to hide and protect the driver, but naturally you can remove it if you wish.

This woofer is made from high-excursion Satin-Anodised Pure Aluminium (S-PAL), a material claimed to be ideal for the purpose of subwoofers — to move large volumes of air (to deliver deep bass output) while being able to move in and out quickly (to accurately produce the speed of the lower-frequency signal it is fed). Paradigm has also designed its Defiance subs to dissipate heat well during high-volume playback.

The S12 should be plenty powerful enough for most (if not all) rooms, systems and volume preferences. Indeed, for my relatively humble living space and system, I almost certainly would have been served well enough by the 10-inch model.

Driving that substantial woofer is a Class D amplifier, providing a hefty 800 watts of continuous (RMS) power and 1,200 watts of peak power. It isn't surprising, then, to see anti-vibration feet attached to the base of the cabinet. These feet are suitable for all floor types, but a set of carpet spikes is supplied in the box for greater stability and resonance control.

The chassis itself is your standard-shaped cube enclosure, although the side panels are slightly curved to create what I suppose you could call some sort of style. Considering the majority of subs are 'just' boxes, it's pleasing to see that some extra consideration has gone into the Defiance S Series' design. The cabinet walls are inch-thick MDF and reinforced with bracing and internal support in the name of high rigidity and, again, resonance control.

Bearing in mind those quoted power figures in particular, you shouldn't be surprised to read that the sub is 25kg heavy and therefore requires two people to unbox it and move it into position. Preferably two gloved people, at that — the S12's only available finish of gloss black is a bit of a fingerprint magnet. The smaller S10 is available in both gloss black and satin white.

What's particularly noteworthy about the Defiance S12 is that it offers an element of freedom when it comes to positioning, thanks to its built-in wireless capability. Simply plug the supplied wireless transmitter box into your (stereo or otherwise) amplifier via coaxial or a supplied RCA cable, and it automatically connects to the subwoofer's integrated wireless receiver, and transmits to it the receiving music signal, flawlessly and without noticeable lag.

Naturally, you can go the wired route instead if you wish, courtesy of a generous smattering of physical connections.

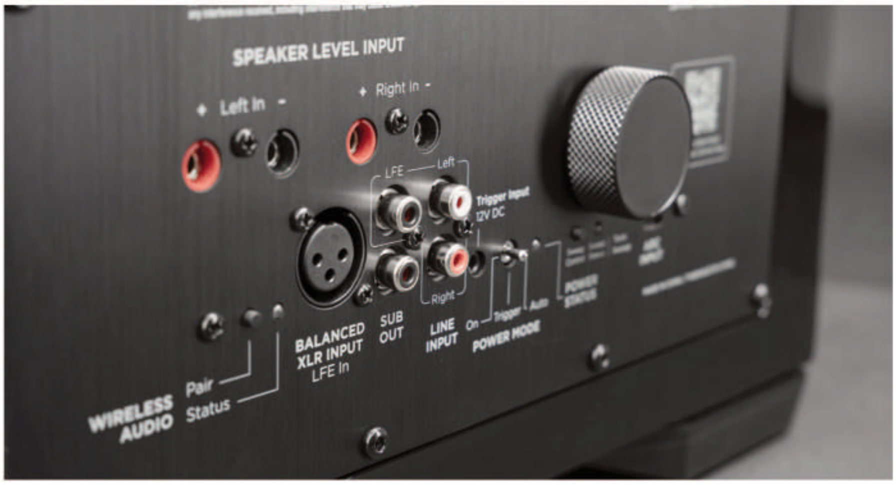
The line-level RCA inputs can be used to connect the subwoofer to the main output or pre-out on a receiver/preamplifier, while the more common line-level RCA and XLR LFE inputs can connect it to the LFE/sub-out on a receiver/preamplifier. There are even speaker-level inputs that allow for standard, banana-plug-terminated speaker cables to be used for the subwoofer connection, if your amplifier doesn't have a dedicated sub output or you simply prefer to go that way.

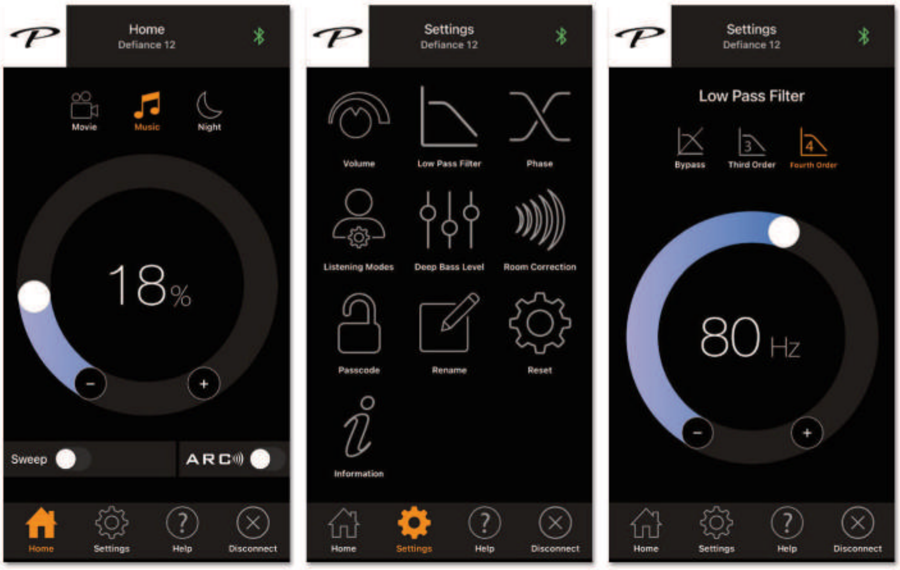
Whoever route you take and wherever you choose to position the Defiance S12 (not quite sure where in your room is best? See the panel overpage), its support of Anthem Room Correction calibration allows you to optimise performance according to your room's environment.

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Indeed, the Defiance S12's built-in wireless connectivity also allows the sub to be 'controlled' via the dedicated Paradigm Subwoofer Control app, free to download for iOS and Android devices. App control came to the Defiance range in 2018, and while other subwoofer brands, such as SVS, also offer some form of phone control, Paradigm's handily supports Anthem's room optimisation software.

For the uninitiated, such room-correction technology works to limit the sonic anomalies in the frequency response inherently caused by things in your room,





The Defiance S12's functions and features can be managed by the dedicated and foolproof Paradigm app.

such as windows, walls, floors and even your furnishings, right down to the cushions you may have on your sofa. In Anthem's words, its technology 'measures the output of each speaker relative to the listening area, then, through a series of calculations, adjusts its output. Not only does ARC correct peaks and dips in a speaker's frequency response, but it also preserves the beneficial acoustic attributes of a room — attributes based on proven psychoacoustic science (the study of how humans hear and experience sound).'

If you want to take advantage of this (and I recommend you do if your room is in any way 'tricky'), you will need a computer and an ARC Genesis-compatible microphone (available from your Paradigm dealer) to perform the room correction optimisation. The phone app can simply turn on/off the resulting processing (as you can see in the left-most screenshot above).

The Paradigm app's interface is relatively plain-looking, with the home screen dominated by a sliding volume control. But when you make adjustments, the sub is quick to respond to them.

The app is also where you can set low-pass filters if, like mine, your amplifier doesn't have its own bass management settings. You can select from 3rd-order or 4th-order filters. I selected the latter at 80Hz, since my speakers have a frequency response of 79Hz–28kHz, as per the advice of my trusty colleague, Greg Borrowman, who wrote in a 'How to set up your subwoofer' article (https://www.whathifi.com/advice/how-to-set-up-your-subwoofer) that the crossover level is the 'highest frequency your subwoofer will play, where it'll take over from your main speakers', and should be just above the lowest parameter of speaker's frequency range (typically stated in the manual).

LISTENING SESSIONS

To kick things off, I played a few test tones through the Defiance S12, including a 10Hz to 20kHz low-frequency sine sweep with my speakers removed from the system. I had to play it a few times, as during the first couple I found myself focusing solely on the rumble being sent through my apartment. When I refocused, I noticed just how smoothly the Defiance S12 moved through the frequencies (in steps of 10Hz), before rolling off at around the 100Hz mark.

With the speakers reattached and the low-pass filter activated, I could hear the speakers coming into play closer to the 80Hz, indicating the filter was working as intended. So, onto some music, and how could I not use James Blake's *Limit to Your Love* as my starting point?

As soon as the iconic, rib-shaking bass line kicked in, I was immediately impressed by not only how low the Paradigm could go but also how controlled it was. It carried the momentum of the changing rhythm effortlessly, flexing its agility.

Organ music is a fantastic test of a subwoofer's abilities due to the pedalboards' deep notes. I turned to Simon Preston's recording of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, which was recorded on the Rieger organ in Westminster Abbey, to capture the incredible scale and weight of the instrument. Not only did the Defiance S12 send it into my listening space with depth, control and a palpable sense of texture, but it was able to produce the kind of basement lows I could *feel* more distinctly than hear.

The integration with my speakers was tight-knit, too: it didn't sound as though a separate entity was providing the lowest bass notes, the sub's output blending into

WHERE TO POSITION YOUR SUBWOOFER

As deep bass is less directional than treble and midrange, you can place your sub almost anywhere. However, you can get better results if you do some fine-tuning…

For the best integration with your room, try to find a room 'node'. Place your subwoofer where you usually sit, connect it, and then disconnect your speakers (at the amplifier end). Play a piece of music with plenty of good bass, and then walk around your room, listening to the low frequencies.

As you walk around, you'll hear the bass alternately get stronger and weaker, caused by the interaction of the bass notes and your room's acoustics. At some points in the room, the bass might be so weak that you will barely be able to hear it at all. Conversely, you'll hear lifts in bass in several places, and you should mark all these spots by sticking white tape to the carpet. Once you have covered the entire floor area, your carpet should be littered with bits of white tape. These are 'nodes', and your sub should go in one of these locations.

If you only ever listen to your system yourself, you can now move the subwoofer anywhere there is a bit of tape, and this will be a good position for the room and your listening position. Since you will usually have several spots to choose from, choose the most convenient location, where the subwoofer will be the least conspicuous and the most 'out of the way'. Its proximity to a power point would be another consideration, as supplied subwoofer power cables aren't always that generous when it comes to length.

If someone usually listens to music (or watches movies) with you, you should now move the subwoofer to where their head would usually be, and repeat the entire 'walking around' process, but this time it will go much faster, because you will only have to listen at the spots you have already taped. If the bass is still strong at a point, leave the tape on the floor. If the bass is now weak at this point, remove the tape. This time around, you will find that you can put the subwoofer anywhere there is still tape and be assured of getting good bass at the listening position.

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the speaker's, as it should.

Finally, I loaded up Oxygène, Pt. 4 by one of my favourite composers, Jean-Michel Jarre. Once again, the Paradigm sub proved it was an accomplished performer, sticking the faster beat and providing the perfect backing bass rhythm.

CONCLUSION

If you are in the position I found myself in before testing the Paradigm Defiance S12, in that you're unsure if you should, or need to, add a subwoofer to your stereo system, I can confidently recommend that you audition one at the very least. You, like me, may never go back. ***Max Langridge***

SPECS & CONTACT

Design: 12-inch high-excursion satin-anodized pure aluminium bass driver, sealed enclosure, wireless connectivity
Amplifier: Class D, 800W continuous, 1200W peak
Standby power consumption: 0.5W (<2W wireless enabled)
Low-frequency response: 16Hz (DIN)
Connections: RCA, XLR LFE, Stereo RCA, Speaker Level, Sub Out, ARC (USB-C)
Dimensions (hwd): 37.7cm x 40.2cm x 43.3cm
Weight: 24.3kg
Distributor: Audio Active
T: (03) 9699 8900
E: info@audioactive.org.uk
W: www.audioactive.com.au

Readers interested in a full technical appraisal of the performance of the Paradigm Defiance S12 Subwoofer should continue on and read the **LABORATORY TEST REPORT** published on this page. Readers should note that the results mentioned in the report, tabulated in performance charts and/or displayed using graphs and/or photographs should be construed as applying only to the specific sample tested.

Laboratory Test Report

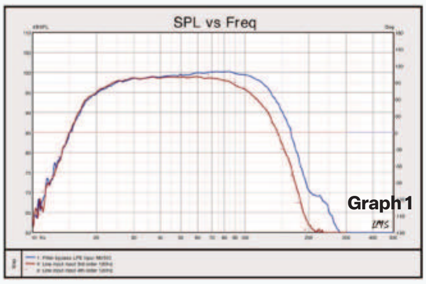
Graph 1 shows the frequency response of the Paradigm Defiance S12 subwoofer using the LFE input (blue trace) and the Line Input with the LPF set to its maximum 120Hz position (brown traces), as measured by *Newport Test Labs* using a nearfield measurement technique.

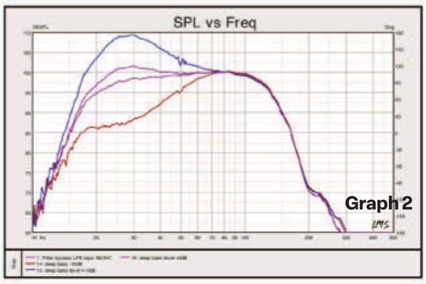
As you would expect, the response via the LFE input is the most extended, though not the most linear, extending from 17Hz to 130Hz ±3dB. The responses through the line input, at the LPF filter's maximum setting, are 17Hz to 110Hz ±3dB. For this setting, the difference in responses between the 3rd-order and 4th-order slopes is negligible: the 4th-order filter arguably returns a slightly flatter response between 17Hz and 100Hz, but the increase in flatness is so slight that it would not be at all audible.

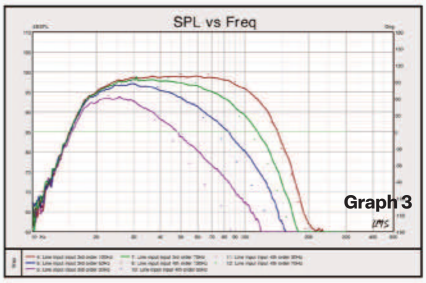
Graph 2 shows the effect of the Deep Bass Boost control on the Defiance S12's frequency response. The first thing to note is that the small wiggles on the traces at 50Hz are the result of some mains hum creeping into the test setup, and therefore should be ignored, as these won't be present in a domestic environment. The blue trace shows that the maximum (+10dB) setting does, indeed, deliver the claimed 10dB of boost, but only at 30Hz. Slightly less boost is applied at higher frequencies (5dB at 50Hz, for example) and also at lower frequencies (5dB at 20Hz). The boost is quite extreme, so users should exercise caution when applying it!

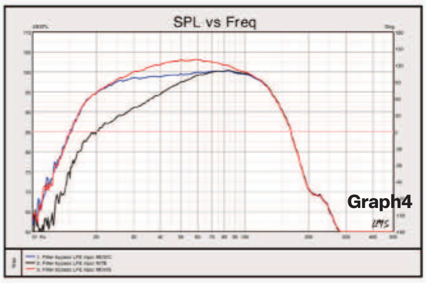
The black trace shows the 'native' response with the control at its 0dB setting, so you can see that by applying just a little boost (+3dB), you can flatten the low-frequency response in the 20–50Hz region (purple trace).

Graph 3 shows the Defiance S12's frequency response for the four different frequency turnover settings of the LPF (120Hz, 75Hz, 50Hz and 30Hz), and for the two different-order slopes for each of these settings. The solid traces are the 3rd-order slopes, the dashed traces the 4th-order ones. These traces serve to highlight that you will be able to correctly integrate the Defiance S12 with any pair of main speakers, from large floorstanders to small bookshelf designs.









The final graph, Graph 4, shows the effect on the frequency response when using the Music (blue trace), Movie (red trace) and Night (black trace) settings. The Music setting returns the flattest response and is essentially the 'native' response of the Paradigm subwoofer shown in Graph 1. The Movie setting ensures significantly increased bass output in the region where most movie sound effects occur, while the Night trace rolls off the low-frequency response significantly below 60Hz to minimise low-frequency transmission to neighbours, while still retaining some bass output in the region around 40–130Hz.

Overall, the Paradigm Defiance S12 returned excellent performances across all of its settings in the tests performed by *Newport Test Labs*. It is a well-designed, high-performance subwoofer.

Steve Holding

australian

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MARCH Audio
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March Audio P801

Power Amplifier

+
- Massive power...
- In a relatively compact box
- Unimpeachable delivery

−
- Not much to look at

RRP **$3,300 each**

Power amplifiers can suffer an image crisis in the hi-fi world. Among the shinier and busier components of a hi-fi stack, power amps like these from March Audio can seem like featureless black boxes. Look at them — one light each, and no knobs! Once they're plugged into your system, chances are you will barely think about them again. You'll interact with your preamplifier, stream to your streamer, put discs into your player, carefully place vinyl onto your turntable, and sit there in front of your speakers. The power amps just sit quietly in the dark, making the signal bigger.

Boring! Such is an outsider's view of power amplifiers. But this, dear readers, is a mistaken perception.

DESIGN & BUILD

March Audio's P801 power amps are certainly black, and they are also bigger than I had imagined from first seeing the pictures: each has a footprint of about 26 x 35cm and is some 8.5cm tall, so that I could only just squeeze them both side by side on one shelf, between the pillars of a Quadraspire hi-fi rack, as you can see illustrated above. The front panels are all black and blank, save for a power button on the right side which illuminates with a red ring when the power is on, and of course the brand logo.

They're substantial, too, the cases milled from solid aluminium with a tough anodised matte finish. The P801s are handbuilt and individually tested in Western Australia, and come with a five-year warranty.

Round the back, the two speaker binding posts are solidly fixed, so that even my largest cables caused no droop; these are March Audio's preferred ETI Research Kryo binding posts, stylish, compact and manufactured from an alloy of copper and tellurium with silver plating for conductivity and durability.

The only other connections to the rear are the power socket and the single input, a Neutrik XLR socket: the P801 has only this balanced connection and is optimised for its higher-level (4V) signals. Whether this is inconvenient depends on what you plug in. If your preamp has balanced XLR outputs, no problem. If you have only RCA unbalanced outputs available, you can use adapter cables (as I did), and press a two-position button on the back to deliver an extra boost of 6dB.

DESIGN

What's going on inside? How much power does the pair of P801s bring? As you peruse amplifiers from March Audio, it helps to realise that their model numbers have been chosen according to a fairly easy formula relating to their power into four ohms — it's another sign of the engineer in proprietor and designer Alan March. So the P422, for example, means 42–2, i.e. two channels of 425W into 4 ohms. Then the P501 is 50–1, so one channel of 500W into 4 ohms.

By which I can surmise that each P801 is quite the beast: one channel of 800W into four ohms. But what detail lies behind this headline figure?

The P801s manage to combine expertise from three countries. Firstly Australia, of course, where March Audio is based and the products built; the company is in Western Australia, originally out of Albany but now based near Gingin, "about an hour north-east of the centre of Perth, or about 40 minutes from the top north outskirts of Perth," says March. "It's a rural area and it's very sunny and nice. Lovely."

This is a Brit enjoying the Australian sun. His expertise comes from an engineering career at Rolls-Royce in the UK, much of it in aircraft engine test sites, first collecting data on temperatures, pressures, vibration, stress and strain in jet engines, then developing digital recording systems to do it better. So what has all that got to do with audio, you ask?

"Well, a lot of the things that we were recording were audio frequency signals, very low signal levels, like a vibration transducer," March told me. "So I've been analysing and acquiring and recording audio-frequency signals for decades, basically like a recording engineer — just not with music."

When he and his family decamped to Australia, he first moved his expertise to mining (hence WA), but after four years travelling up to the Pilbara doing engineering work he decided to become his own boss, founding March Audio in 2018. In the seven years since, his amplifiers and loudspeakers have received various awards, including those from sister magazine *Sound+Image*.

The final country in the March Audio equation is Denmark: home to Purifi, the company which makes the modules at the heart of these amplifiers. Purifi's Eigentakt (German for 'self-clocking') is Bruno Putzeys' latest advance in Class D amplification (his previous was Hypex Ncore), developed in collaboration with Lars Risbo, another digital audio pioneer of switching PCM-PWM audio amplifiers. The module inside each P801 is one of Purifi's latest 1ET9040BA modules.

"This is what Purifi calls the second generation of Eigentakt," says March. "They've done two things that have improved its performance. This particular module is a bridged amplifier. If you look at the circuits, it looks like two of their other amplifiers side by side, and that's essentially what it is. The bridge is to develop a much higher power output at lower power supply voltage levels, so it's got massive power output, like 1400 watts into 2 ohms at 0.1% distortion. That will hopefully drive any speaker on the market to within an inch of its life.

"They've [also] updated the design of the pulse width modulator, the bit that makes it really work. So that's vastly decreased the noise and distortion levels; we're almost approaching basically dark levels of noise and distortion. Incredible."

PRE AND POWER

March isn't the only company making use of Eigentakt amplification: Marantz has just adopted it for its flagship Model 10, NAD was quick to adopt it for some of its amplifiers, and other smaller brands also use the modules.

March Audio, though, was one of the first, and confidently claims its implementation of the new model exceeds all others. That's because these aren't simply modules you put in a box and wire to inputs and outputs, says March; they still require an input buffer, and great attention to their power supplies.

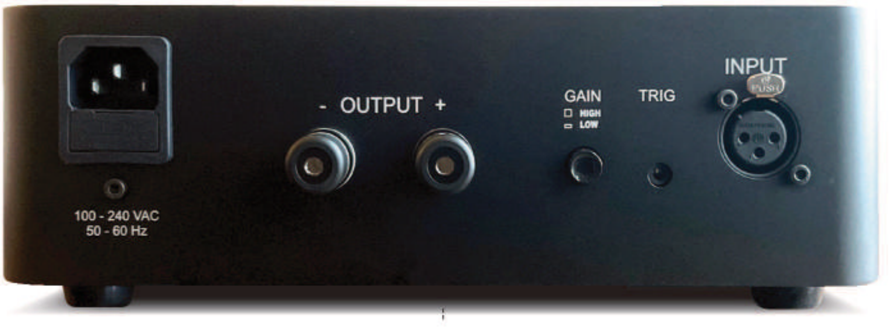
"Those are the two factors that are critical to the performance of the amplifier," he says. "So these modules don't really work on their own. They need an upfront preamplifier, shall we say, inside the amplifier to bring the signal voltages up to a high enough level, and to be able to drive the Purifi module, which is actually very low input impedance so you need a circuit that can drive some current into that.

> **An amp should be simply a wire with gain. Hence there might be little to describe sonically, other than to say 'it works'. Well, the P801 works...**

"And the performance of this latest generation of modules is so good — so low noise, so low distortion — that it's become incredibly difficult to make a buffer amplifier that is good enough to do the job and actually allow the module to perform to its highest ability. It took us a few attempts and a few designs to really bottom it out and get it to that level. I'm quite confident in saying our input buffer [March calls it the 'Ultra Buffer'] is more transparent, lower noise and lower distortion than any of our competitors.

"The other thing is that all of our competitors use the off-the shelf Hypex power supply for these, and they just aren't good enough for the job. They're higher noise, they have less current capability. So you will probably find that our amps are the only ones that actually deliver the full Purifi power output, because our power supplies are the correct voltage and provide enough power and current to allow the module to work. To get the full 1400W at 0.1%, that's all down to the power supply being man enough for the job, basically."

And those power figures for the P801 are, as quoted by March with 0.1% THD, 375W into 8 ohms, rising to 750W into 4 ohms, and 1400W into 2 ohms. When delivering 100W into 4 ohms, the THD+N



MARCH audio

is just 0.0008% (20Hz-20kHz). The amps are, according to March Audio, 'fully stable with loads right down to zero ohms, a massive 40-amp current and power output capability ensuring tremendous grip and drive even with the most insensitive and challenging of speaker loads'.

Some impressive numbers, then. But then how do they sound?

LISTENING SESSIONS

Yes, how *do* they sound? I noted a comment on one audio forum where someone had asked the generalised question "What is Purifi's sound signature?" The first reply was "There is no sound signature. Purifi amps are wires with gain."

This refers to the classic description of an amplifier that is attributed to either Stewart Hegeman of Harman Kardon Citation fame, or Peter Walker of Quad. An amp should not change the input but simply make it bigger: a wire with gain. Hence there might be little to describe sonically, other than to say "it works".

Well, the P801 works. I started with some high-intensity fusion: Al Di Meola's *Broken Heart* from Opus. This serves a centre stage of increasing complexity flanked by wide-panned fingerpicking guitars — a combination all too easily confused by small hi-fi — but there was no muddling here: every element was presented bright and clear, and remained so throughout the track's ebb and flow.

Also notable was the sharp edging to guitar notes: tight and rapid, all click, no softening, no overhang, thereby indicating amps that are fast as well as powerful.

> ...substantial, too, the cases milled from solid aluminium with a tough anodised matte finish. The P801s are handbuilt and individually tested...

Joan Armatrading's latest album, How Did This Happen And What Does it Now Mean, was made in her home studio, potentially more of challenge for clarity, but these amps kept even the interwoven contrapuntal vocals on the opener *25 Kisses* clear, separate, and with each element in their place. Individual vocal treatments were perfectly audible, while I'd even guess, if possibly wrongly, that the bell-like sounds were played on a Yamaha DX keyboard, so characteristic of FM synthesis were those metallic sounds revealed to be by the clarity of the P801s' window onto sound.

Some vintage hi-fi testers: how was the detail and soundstaging on Single Gun Theory's *Fall*? Scintillating and deeply presented, while the rhythm held full weight and constant tone in the centre. How was Kylie's vocal cut-through on *Where The Wild Roses Grow*, often tricky for bright systems to hold from getting spitty? Bright enough to hear the aspiration but never a spit to be suffered, while the bass was utterly real and solid, and the strings woven left and right: I cranked this one, and what a performance it was, leaving me firmly focused on the music, not the amplifier — as it should be, of course.

I did notice that even when I left the P801 amps powered up overnight and returned to them in the morning, they were still pretty warm to the touch despite not playing for hours. These are not Class D amps that don't get hot at all, then?

"That is a bit of a myth, that they don't get warm at all," says March. "What you're feeling there is what they call idle losses. So when they're at higher power levels, they'll be in the region of 95% efficient — you might be pumping out a kilowatt, but you'll only be wasting 50 watts in here. So at high power levels they really are very efficient, and won't be too much hotter than when they're on idle, just sitting there. The closer you get to zero power, the less efficient an amplifier is, and when you get to zero power, of course, it's got essentially zero efficiency. When idle, it's probably sitting there consuming and wasting about 15 watts. It's gonna go somewhere, and it comes out as heat. But not much, which means we can use small cases, a shoe box; we don't need massive heatsinks everywhere to get rid of that."

I asked whether there was any sonic penalty for keeping the amps powered on or turning them off between sessions. Is this less of an issue with Class D?

"Definitely," he says. "So there are amps out there which are not what I would call thermally stable. As they warm up, they change their performance. But with our Purifi amplifiers, we've done lots of tests on this, they don't. If anything their performance will very slightly reduce with increasing temperature, so it's not like some old AB amplifiers which don't have effective bias settings which creep over time or with temperature. Basically they don't change. Switch them on, 10 minutes, it'll be as good as it gets."

VERDICT

Instantly ready to play at their best, then, and at best seemingly lacking any characteristics other than effortless power, clear dynamic speed, and absolute silence in terms of noise floor. In this, the P801s offer the performance you might expect from vastly larger heatsink-loaded beasts, yet you can fit two of these, just, on one shelf on an equipment rack. Where you can then forget them, boring black power amps tucked away, as they get on with doing their remarkable job. ***Jez Ford***

SPECS & CONTACT

Input: Neutrik XLR balanced (RCA connection requires adaptor cables)
Outputs: ETI Research Kryo binding posts
Power output: 375W into 8 ohms, 750W into 4 ohms, 1400W into 2 ohms (@ 0.1% THD)
Current output: 40 amps
THD+N: 0.00007% (-125dB) @ 100W, 4 ohms, 20Hz-20kHz; 0.00015% (-116dB) @ 5W, 4 ohms, 20Hz-20kHz
Signal to noise ratio: 140dB(A)
Frequency response: 2Hz–20kHz -0.05dB; 2Hz–82kHz -3dB
Dimensions (hwd): 8.5 x 25.5 x 34.5cm
Weight: 4kg each

Contact: March Audio
T: 04 4794 6771
W: www.marchaudio.com

MUSICAL FIDELITY

B1xi

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER B1xi
by MUSICAL FIDELITY
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POWER
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EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
Tested by The Experts

EISA AWARDS 2025-2026

Here at *Australian Hi-Fi* we work with other technical journalists and editors around the world as part of the Expert Imaging & Sound Association, EISA, which for 42 years has presented its annual awards to the best-value and highest-performing consumer electronics you can buy. *Australian Hi-Fi* placed its votes; now here are the winners…

Australian Hi-Fi and *Sound + Image* magazines are EISA's exclusive representatives for Hi-Fi and Home Theatre respectively here in Australia. EISA is a community of 54 technology magazines, websites and social media commentators, from 27 countries at present, specialising in hi-fi, home theatre, photo and video, in-car and mobile electronics. Every year the EISA jury of experts combines their editorial experience to collectively judge and reward the best products in each category of each sector with a coveted EISA Award.

29 Awards were handed out this year, decided from a judging process that includes online presentations and global seminars between EISA editors, manufacturers and product designers, followed by judging sessions between EISA's various Expert Groups who decide the winners that will represent the world's best in the final Awards.

Then we all gather for the EISA Awards Gala, currently held at Ascot Racecourse in the UK. We'll be returning to that event not long after you read this advance notification of all the winners in the pages which follow, with the full citations for our own particular AV categories, and the full list at the end. For full details of the Home Theatre category winners see issue #363 of *Sound + Image*, or head to our dedicated EISA Awards mini site at **www.aushifi.com.**

Presentations for 2025-2026 took place online (above) before judging; the Awards Gala this year will be held at the Ascot Racecourse in the UK.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
HI-FI SYSTEM
Denon DP-3000NE, DCD-3000NE & PMA-3000NE

EISA HI-FI SYSTEM 2025-2026

Denon DP-3000NE, DCD-3000NE & PMA-3000NE

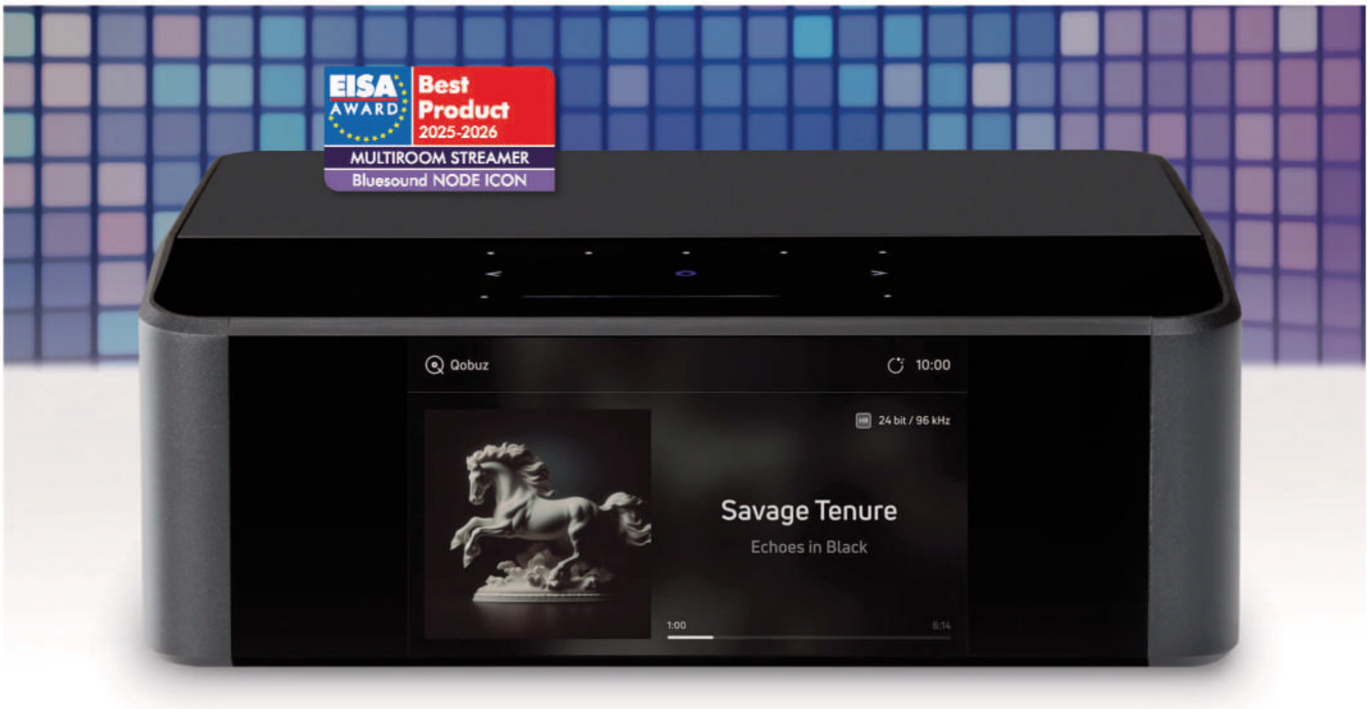
While the Denon PMA-3000NE integrated amplifier, DCD-3000NE SACD/CD player and DP-3000NE turntable have individual appeal, it's as a trio that they gel into an astonishing system worthy of one of the oldest brands in hi-fi. The innovative UHC-MOS Single Push-Pull circuit at the heart of the PMA-3000NE amp delivers the goods in terms of speaker-driving power and dynamics, alongside a quad DAC arrangement and wide selection of digital and analogue inputs to connect just about any source. Turntables fitted with MM or MC cartridges are supported, and Denon's meticulously engineered DP-3000NE direct-drive design is the prime candidate. The DCD-3000NE is a first-rate addition too, allowing you to play your CD and SACD collection in crisp, engaging quality. Proof that good things come in threes.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
DAC
Hegel D50

EISA DAC 2025-2026

Hegel D50

Nicknamed the 'Raven', Hegel's D50 is a welcome addition to the standalone DAC segment and well equipped with inputs, including AES/EBU, USB-B, and a BNC connection supporting the DAC-Loop function of its integrated amplifiers. Hegel has, in the past, provided superb DAC stages across its hi-fi hardware, adding its own 'twist' to familiar designs, but here it has leveraged in-house expertise to further refine the technology, with a focus on signal purity. The result is a D/A converter that prioritises a naturalistic, musical sound above obvious embellishment. It's a performance reflected in the unit's unobtrusive black casework, stressing that the Raven is about what you hear, not what you see. This might just be a Nordic classic in the making…



EISA MULTIROOM STREAMER 2025-2026

Bluesound NODE ICON

Evolved from Bluesound's NODE and NODE NANO streamers, the flagship NODE ICON deploys a new dual-mono DAC stage that delivers excellent sound quality from wired and wireless sources, and debuts a 5in, full-colour display. Fitted with a slew of connections, including HDMI eARC and a balanced XLR output, this streamer is ready to function as the 'brains' of a whole music system, underpinned by the BluOS multiroom platform and app control. AirPlay 2 and bi-directional Bluetooth, with aptX HD support, add to its versatility, while Dirac Live calibration is available to tackle 'tricky' room acoustics. Easy to use, gorgeously styled and packed with features, Bluesound's newest NODE is a triumph.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
STREAMER
FiiO S15

EISA STREAMER 2025-2026

FiiO S15

From a brand known for its portable and desktop devices, the S15 finds FiiO making a stunning entry into the full-sized streamer category. Running powerful Android-based software and featuring AKM's flagship upsampling/DAC combination, the unit delivers a fluid, detailed musical experience from integrated apps or FiiO's own Music interface. Control, through the S15's 7.84in touchscreen or companion app, includes multiple operating modes – Pure Music and USB DAC functions allow users to disable unnecessary features for optimal performance. HDMI eARC, plus an additional HDMI input, handle integration into home theatre systems, while the array of digital and analogue outputs makes it easy to incorporate the S15 into your hi-fi setup. Streamers don't get more versatile than this!

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
PREMIUM STREAMER
Eversolo DMP-A10

EISA PREMIUM STREAMER 2025-2026

Eversolo DMP-A10

After the success of the previous EISA Award-winning DMP-A8, Eversolo marches into the premium streamer category with its full-sized DMP-A10. Build quality and aesthetic design of this unit are spectacular – not least the touchscreen interface and built-in display of the volume control – but it's what's under the hood that truly impresses. Close attention has been paid to the technical design, focusing on reduced jitter and noise and the use of high-end components in the DAC and preamp stages. The software and app-based interface is built on the Android platform, and refined by Eversolo to be intuitive and versatile. The DMP-A10 offers a wealth of functions to explore, including room correction, dual-sub control, extensive DSP/EQ adjustment, and so much more…

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
BEST VALUE TURNTABLE
Pro-Ject E1.2

EISA BEST VALUE TURNTABLE 2025-2026

Pro-Ject E1.2

Although an affordable turntable designed to make vinyl accessible to all, Pro-Ject's E1.2 doesn't skimp on quality. Offering robust bass and fulsome vocals, this is a disc spinner that's equally suited to modern pop releases and vintage jazz. The plug 'n' play design includes a pre-adjusted Pick it MM E cartridge to take the sting out of setup, and the step-by-step manual helps vinyl novices get quickly on their way. It's a complete package too, supplied with dust cover, felt mat, and high-quality RCA cable. The E1.2 is a welcome, well-rounded offering in the often 'quirky' budget segment, and there are options with Bluetooth output or phono stage integration to make system setup even easier.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
PREMIUM TURNTABLE
European Audio Team F-Dur
EAT
EAT

EISA PREMIUM TURNTABLE 2025-2026

European Audio Team F-Dur

Nothing says 'serious' like a satin-black finished turntable weighing in at 27kg, and in the case of European Audio Team's F-Dur, this heft is thanks to a substantial platter crafted from solid aluminium and TPE-damped to absorb resonances. Also addressing weak points that can impair vinyl playback are the deck's dual AC motor design and improved belts to minimise wow and flutter, and a massive MDF plinth with adjustable feet. The 12-inch F-Note aluminium tonearm, in silver or matte black finish is also easily adjustable, integrating a laser level for setup. Best of all, the F-Dur matches its premium engineering with a heartfelt performance that brings you closer to your favourite tracks on your treasured vinyl.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
TURNTABLE
Technics SL-1300G

EISA TURNTABLE 2025-2026

Technics SL-1300G

In abandoning the DJ-friendly functions that Technics decks are known for, the SL-1300G resolutely aims for a top-tier performance focused on the essence of vinyl reproduction, while still cutting a stylish figure in silver or black. The Japanese brand's new ΔΣ-Drive technology is the result of decades of experience with direct-drive motor systems, and delivers smooth, stable and quiet rotation – ensuring playback is as dynamic and exact as can be. The three-layer, dynamically balanced platter, and vibration-damped dual-layer chassis, also contribute to the SL-1300G's audiophile performance, as does its well-engineered S-shaped tonearm. In short, Technics' turntable aims to extract every ounce of musical information from the grooves of your vinyl, and does so with panache.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
PHONO PREAMPLIFIER
Musical Fidelity M8x Vinyl

EISA PHONO PREAMP 2025-2026

Musical Fidelity M8x Vinyl

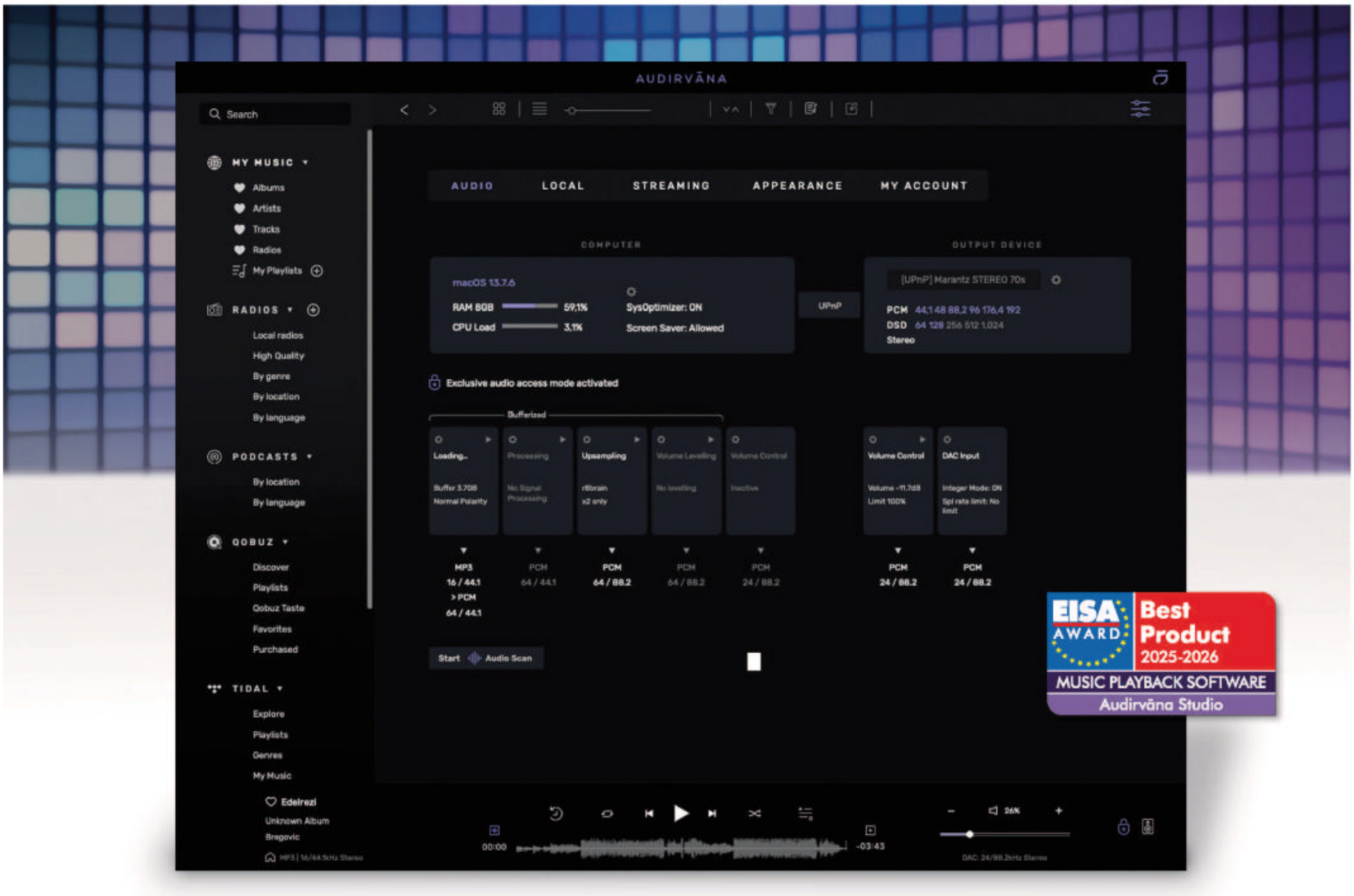
Musical Fidelity's M8x Vinyl is not your average phono preamplifier. Designed to accommodate virtually any moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridge through its comprehensive loading and gain options, it caters to demanding vinyl enthusiasts – including those with multiple tonearms and turntables, courtesy of its extensive connectivity. In use, the excellent channel separation and rich, detailed sound rises from a beautifully dark background, which points to the M8x Vinyl's thoughtful interior design and robust construction. A phono stage that ticks all the boxes, this Musical Fidelity unit will help you get the very best from your vinyl collection and stands ready for future deck or cartridge upgrades.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
CARTRIDGE
Nagaoka MP-700
NAGAOKA
MP-700

EISA CARTRIDGE 2025-2026

Nagaoka MP-700

Hailing from a maestro cartridge builder, the MP-700 is the first new product from Nagaoka in over 15 years, coinciding with the 85th anniversary of the Japanese manufacturer. It's been worth the wait, as this accomplished cartridge takes moving permalloy technology to a new level. Easy to set up and not requiring specialised phono pre-amplification, the MP-700 offers an alternate path when considering an upgrade from moving-magnet to moving-coil. Through its carefully engineered ultra-duralumin body and nude microridge diamond stylus, it delivers grand dynamics, excellent detail reproduction and superior tracking ability. The Nagaoka MP-700 is a tour de force that will breathe fresh life into your vinyl collection.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COMPUTER
OUTPUT DEVICE
UPnP
Start
Audio Scan
EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
MUSIC PLAYBACK SOFTWARE
Audirvāna Studio

macOS 13.7.6
RAM 8GB 59,1%
CPU Load 3,1%
SysOptimizer: ON
Screen Saver: Allowed

[UPnP] Marantz STEREO 70s
PCM 44,1 48 88,2 96 176,4 192
DSD 64 128 256 512 1.024
Stereo

Exclusive audio access mode activated

Bufferized

Loading.. – Buffer 3.7GB, Normal Polarity – MP3 16 / 44.1 > PCM 64 / 44.1
Processing – No Signal Processing – PCM 64 / 44.1
Upsampling – r8brain x2 only – PCM 64 / 88.2
Volume Levelling – No levelling – PCM 64 / 88.2
Volume Control – Inactive – PCM 24 / 88.2
Volume Control – Volume -11.7dB, Limit 100% – PCM 24 / 88.2
DAC Input – Integer Mode: ON, Spl rate limit: No limit – PCM 24 / 88.2

Edelrezi
Unknown Album
Bregovic
MP3 | 16/44.1kHz Stereo
00:00
-03:43
26%
DAC: 24/88.2kHz Stereo

EISA MUSIC PLAYBACK SOFTWARE 2025-2026

Audirvāna Studio

There are many ways to stream music to audio systems and speakers, but Audirvāna Studio distinguishes itself with a bespoke interface that integrates locally stored music with selected streaming services, Internet radio, and podcasts. Whether savouring old favourites or discovering new music, users can easily enjoy high-quality playback either via USB to a DAC or over a network to a UPnP-enabled device – the software also caters to relaxed, sofa-based listening through an intuitive control app. Comprehensive upsampling and digital signal processing options are on hand to fine-tune performance, while Audirvāna applies optimisation to limit interference from the PC processor, all to get the most out of your music.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
BEST VALUE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
Musical Fidelity B1xi
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER B1xi
by MUSICAL FIDELITY

EISA BEST VALUE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER 2025-2026

Musical Fidelity B1xi

Having earned a 2024-2025 EISA Award for its revived A1 amplifier, Musical Fidelity repeats the trick with its resurrection of the B1. While retaining the original's Class AB topology, the new B1xi integrated amplifier is a modern interpretation of the 1980s icon, with an improved power supply and re-engineered circuit design now including a USB digital input. Extra attention paid to reducing the impact of RF interference and the implementation of a new phono stage pays off, both when spinning vinyl or other sources through digital and analogue inputs. Musical Fidelity has deliberately omitted Wi-Fi streaming to keep this affordable model simple, but Bluetooth and HDMI eARC are smart additions, making the B1xi a very sensible choice for music and TV sound.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
STREAMING AMPLIFIER
Marantz MODEL 60n
MODEL 60n
marantz
CD
40

EISA STREAMING AMPLIFIER 2025-2026

Marantz MODEL 60n

In a market replete with do-it-all amplifiers, Marantz's MODEL 60n stands out. Whether playing TV audio via HDMI eARC, listening to vinyl through the MM phono connection or using one of its many other inputs, the MODEL 60n is a master of the lush and organic sound quality that fans of the brand expect. It's proficient at music streaming as well, handled via the user-friendly HEOS app or with AirPlay 2, Bluetooth, Spotify Connect and Roon among alternative options. Packaged in a slender industrial design that weds vintage elements with sleek modern lines, the Marantz MODEL 60n is an eye-catching addition to any setup – but it's the authenticity when portraying music that seals the deal.

marantz
-50.0
Balanced 1
EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
HIGH-END INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
Marantz MODEL 10

EISA HIGH END INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER 2025-2026

Marantz MODEL 10

Setting a new benchmark, the MODEL 10 is a flagship integrated amplifier with the power to effortlessly drive virtually any loudspeaker. Built at Marantz's Shirakawa facility, its potent output comes from advanced Purifi Class D modules adapted and tuned by Marantz's 'Sound Master'. The result is a captivating listening experience of exceptional clarity and room-filling scale. Aesthetically, the MODEL 10's aluminium chassis, which conceals an internal construction utilising extensive copper shielding of its various stages, evokes classic Marantz designs and exudes audiophile luxury. For an all-encompassing high-end setup, the amplifier can be paired with a matching SACD player and network streamer, bringing its performance to bear on digital as well as analogue sources.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
BEST VALUE STREAMING AMPLIFIER
Eversolo Play
eversolo

EISA BEST VALUE STREAMING AMPLIFIER 2025-2026

Eversolo Play

Eversolo's affordable integrated amplifier packs advanced technology and a wealth of features into an exceptionally compact enclosure. Controlled through a large, customisable touchscreen or smartly designed app, the amp's Android-based platform supports music streaming services, third-party apps, and local music playback. Deep-reaching EQ capabilities, along with room calibration, allow sound optimisation tailored to your listening room and speakers. It's also impressively flexible, with a wide range of connections including HDMI eARC for use with a TV, an MM/MC phono input for turntables, and a USB output to pair with an external DAC. Eversolo's Play is a high-performance 'just add speakers' solution that covers all bases – without hurting your wallet.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER
Quad 33 & Quad 303

EISA PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER 2025-2026

Quad 33 & Quad 303

In revisiting one of the most iconic and revered systems in hi-fi history, Quad has paid homage to Peter Walker's original designs while engineering a performance to meet the expectations of today's audiophiles – this is a 'vintage' reissue as it should be. The 303 amplifier brings an uptick in Class AB power better suited to contemporary speakers, plus the option of adding a second unit for enhanced control and output. The 33 preamp, meanwhile, features upgrades to connectivity and ease of use. In tandem, Quad's amps conjure wide, crisply detailed soundstages that captivate the listener. This is a genuine 'back to the future' system to delight audiophiles both old and new.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS
Sonus faber Sonetto V G2

EISA FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

Sonus faber Sonetto V G2

Blending Italian craftmanship and acoustic engineering, the second generation of the Sonetto V harnesses technology from Sonus faber's flagship Suprema system, including the distinctive Camelia midrange driver and innovative internal cork chamber. The moderate cabinet size, combined with smart looks and exquisite wood finishes, allow this three-way floorstander to easily enhance living room interiors. Sonic performance is just as dazzling, ticking all the boxes whatever music genre you throw at it. Excellent soundstaging, tight, punchy bass and delicious highs ensure the Sonetto V G2 is a loudspeaker to cherish, ready for you to relax and listen to your favourite tunes for hours on end. A work of art!

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS
KEF Q Concerto Meta
KEF

EISA STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

KEF Q Concerto Meta

The name might be a nod to the legendary KEF Concerto from 1969, but all other aspects of the Q Concerto Meta are very much rooted in the 21st century. For the largest standmount model in the renewed Q range, KEF has pulled out all the stops, beginning with the 12th generation Uni-Q driver – with Metamaterial Absorption Technology – for crystal-clear detail and image cohesion. A rare three-way design in this size and price category, the Q Concerto Meta can range over all music styles, delivering delicate classical pieces and thumping techno with the same determination. There's very little this sleek speaker doesn't do well, resulting in a versatile, balanced sound that puts you in the front row.

TRIANGLE
EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
BEST VALUE BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS
Triangle Borea BR04

EISA BEST VALUE BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

Triangle Borea BR04

Delivering genuine hi-fi performance at a price that doesn't break the bank, the Borea BR04 bookshelf scores points for its airy detail and excellent vocal clarity, delivered by Triangle's bespoke silk dome tweeter and 160mm cellulose pulp bass/mid driver. A generously sized cabinet underpins a very respectable low-end, while the front-facing bass reflex port means placement is easier in smaller rooms. It's a great looking speaker too, with no fewer than six finishes ranging from black and white to eye-catching wood options with green or blue baffles. Triangle makes it easy to find a design that suits your tastes, leaving the Borea BR04 to seduce you with its warm, engaging sound.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
PREMIUM STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS
Dynaudio Contour 20 Black Edition
DYNAUDIO
DYNAUDIO

EISA PREMIUM STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

Dynaudio Contour 20 Black Edition

Offering a far larger improvement over the regular Contour 20i than the mere addition of a 'Black Edition' label might suggest, these standmount loudspeakers are a testament to the ingenuity of Dynaudio's R&D department. Upgrading to the company's Esotar 3 tweeter, improving the motor system of the 180mm NeoTec bass/mid driver, optimising the speaker's flared port, and reconfiguring the two-way crossover – these revisions bring about a scintillating performance focused on authenticity. The Contour 20 Black Edition excels at playing music as it was intended by the artist, and the bass extension is remarkable for a standmount design, bringing full-range listening to spaces unsuited to larger models. And, of course, the all-black finish is sumptuous!

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS
Radiant Acoustics Clarity 4.2
RADIANT ACOUSTICS

EISA BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

Radiant Acoustics Clarity 4.2

Bringing together Purifi's engineering know-how, a custom tweeter built in Denmark and the acumen of Peter Lyngdorf's Nordic HiFi, the petite Clarity 4.2 from Radiant Acoustics is a fine example of technical design meeting astonishing performance. You might be able to hold this speaker in your hand – although the build quality and mass of its cabinets, with aluminium baffles, will surprise – but it sounds like a model twice the size. Utilising three 100mm USHINDI woofers from Purifi, two employed as side-firing passive radiators, and an AMT high-frequency driver mounted in a waveguide, the Clarity 4.2 combines a deep, rich bass performance with excellent imaging and detail. Choose from one of three high-quality finishes and enjoy!

EISA HIGH-END STREAMING LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

Focal DIVA UTOPIA

More than just a loudspeaker, Focal's DIVA UTOPIA is a spectacular-sounding system incorporating a streaming platform, DAC and 2x400W of amplification. Combining the best of Focal's cabinet design and driver technology – including dual side-facing woofers – with sister brand Naim's electronics expertise, the well-connected DIVA UTOPIA delivers exceptional performance. It's equally adept at streaming over Bluetooth or through the Focal & Naim app, as handling TV audio via HDMI eARC and music from analogue and USB sources, and all this functionality is wrapped up in a striking injection-moulded enclosure. This is a groundbreaking speaker system that's bound to send shockwaves throughout the audio world – and right into the living spaces of the most demanding music lovers.

EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
HIGH-END STREAMING LOUDSPEAKERS
Focal DIVA UTOPIA

SVS
EISA AWARD
Best Product 2025-2026
SUBWOOFER
SVS SB17-Ultra R|Evolution

EISA SUBWOOFER 2025-2026

SVS SB17-Ultra R|Evolution

A sealed subwoofer engineered for high-end performance in both home cinema and stereo systems, SVS's SB17-Ultra R|Evolution showcases a newly developed 17in driver backed by dual 8in voice coils and a 24kg toroidal ferrite motor. Combined with a dual mono amplifier stage claiming peaks up to 6kW, and an Analog Devices DSP for precise signal processing, the result is deep, accurate bass (comfortably ranging below 20Hz) that's delivered with slam, grip and scale. SVS's control app enables easy adjustments of volume, preset EQ, and setup tools, plus in-depth parametric EQ to tailor the sub's output to your room, loudspeakers and listening preference. The SB17-Ultra R|Evolution is an ideal addition to any premium music or home theatre setup.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
LOUDSPEAKER SERIES
DALI RUBIKORE Series

EISA LOUDSPEAKER SERIES 2025-2026

DALI RUBIKORE

The RUBIKORE loudspeaker family contains multiple models, each built according to DALI's overarching design principles. This consistency is welcome when assembling surround setups, with the LCR-capable RUBIKORE CINEMA and RUBIKORE ON-WALL, in particular, suited to multichannel duties. Yet the lineup, topped by the floorstanding RUBIKORE 8, is also superb for two-channel listening, serving up exciting bass, a refined midrange and crisp, high-frequency detail. Clarity Cone drivers, featuring the manufacturer's proprietary SMC material, plus DALI's characteristic hybrid tweeter array and components leveraged from the flagship KORE speaker, make these loudspeakers hard to beat in their class. Sumptuous finishes, in a choice of four colourways, call to mind the best of high-end Danish design.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKERS
Dynaudio Confidence 20A

EISA ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKERS 2025-2026

Dynaudio Confidence 20A

The latest addition to Dynaudio's flagship Confidence series becomes the brand's premium active loudspeaker – and makes a stunning impression. Leveraging Class D amplification and DSP technologies from Dynaudio's Core studio monitors, and featuring the top-of-the-range Esotar 3 tweeter and NeoTec bass/mid driver, the Confidence 20A's beautifully judged sonics offer controlled bass, crystal-clear detail and thrilling dynamism. The stands are an integral part of the speaker's design, housing the electronics, balanced analogue and digital connections, and user controls that make setup simple. This is a high-end, gorgeously styled active speaker that delivers the sonic goods, but without the hassle that high-performance audio sometimes entails.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
BEST VALUE HEADPHONES
Sennheiser HD 550
SENNHEISER

EISA BEST VALUE HEADPHONES 2025-2026

Sennheiser HD 550

While the classic HD 5xx chassis of the HD 550 will appear familiar to many headphone aficionados, a new 38mm driver custom-built by Sennheiser at its own Irish facility makes all the difference. The open-back HD 550 is tuned to perform with all types of content, from music and live recordings to movie and gaming soundtracks, and its warm, lush sound ensures hours of listening pleasure. Lightweight and comfortable, with impressive build quality and a modular design ensuring durability, the HD 550 is a great choice for die-hard headphone devotees on a budget, and for music lovers taking their first steps on the road to true hi-fi sound.

EISA HI-FI WIRELESS HEADPHONES 2025-2026

Bowers & Wilkins Px7 S3

It isn't easy to distil sixty years of hi-fi experience into modern-day, noise-cancelling wireless headphones, but Bowers & Wilkins has pulled it off with the Px7 S3. These elegantly styled cans are exceedingly good at immersing you in your music, even when on-the-go in very noisy environments, courtesy of a brilliantly efficient noise cancelling system utilising eight microphones. With aptX Lossless providing CD-quality playback over Bluetooth, and discrete DSP and DAC/amplification circuits optimising performance, the Px7 S3 never sounds anything less than thrilling. Add in the smart design, trio of colour options, USB-C connection option and app-based customisable EQ, and B&W's headphone becomes the one to beat.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
HI-FI WIRELESS HEADPHONES
Bowers & Wilkins Px7 S3
Bowers & Wilkins

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
PREMIUM HEADPHONES
Meze Audio POET

EISA PREMIUM HEADPHONES 2025-2026

Meze Audio POET

A premium high-fidelity headphone with *objet d'art* looks, the finely crafted Meze Audio POET brandishes an open-back design to deliver airy detail and an engaging bass performance. Within its sculpted enclosures are planar-magnetic drive units from Ukraine's RINARO ISODYNAMICS, combined with licensed AMTS (Acoustic Metamaterial Tuning System) technology to finesse their high frequency response and deliver long listening sessions without fatigue. Going hand in hand with the POET's refined, immersive performance is an all-round design packed with attention to detail, from the magnetically attached earpads and lightweight headband to the robust carry case and braided 6.35mm cable. A marriage of sound quality, style and ergonomics, Meze Audio's POET will delight headphone enthusiasts.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2025-2026
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER
FiiO K17
USB
EQ: R&B
DSD
DSD512

EISA HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER 2025-2026

FiiO K17

The aluminium chassis and retro-inspired design of FiiO's K17 immediately captures attention, but it's the advanced technology inside that sets it apart. Designed for discerning headphone enthusiasts, this desktop unit's Class AB power stage is capable of driving even the most demanding headphones with ease, while a high-performance dual DAC delivers exceptional clarity and precision. The K17 also functions as a preamp when needed, and its range of digital and connections – including balanced headphone outputs – adds impressive flexibility, alongside wireless streaming via AirPlay, Bluetooth, and Roon. Control is intuitive and enjoyable, thanks to vintage-style knobs paired with a modern touchscreen interface to make every listening session fun as well as sonically rewarding.

HOME THEATRE & VISION GROUP

EISA BEST BUY OLED TV 2025-2026
Philips 55OLED810

EISA BEST BUY MINI LED TV 2025-2026
Hisense 65U7Q PRO

EISA BEST HOME THEATRE OLED TV 2025-2026
Philips 65OLED+950

EISA GAMING TV 2025-2026
TCL 55C6K

EISA GIANT TV 2025-2026
Hisense 100U7Q

EISA HOME THEATRE MINI LED TV 2025-2026
TCL 85C9K

EISA PREMIUM MINI LED TV 2025-2026
Hisense 65U8Q

EISA PREMIUM OLED TV 2025-2026
Loewe stellar 65 dr+

EISA STATEMENT TV 2025-2026
TCL 98C8K

EISA FAMILY TV 2025-2026
TCL 75C7K

EISA OLED TV 2025-2026
Samsung QE65S95F

EISA BEST BUY SOUNDBAR 2025-2026
TCL Q65H

EISA WIRELESS SURROUND SYSTEM 2025-2026
Hisense HT SATURN

EISA SOUNDBAR SYSTEM 2025-2026
Sharp Q HT-SBW55121 & HT-SPR52021

EISA PREMIUM HOME THEATRE AMPLIFIER 2025-2026
Denon AVC-A10H Denon AVR-A10H (in North America)

EISA FAMILY PROJECTOR 2025-2026
Hisense M2 Pro

EISA UST PROJECTOR 2025-2026
Hisense PX3-PRO

EISA HOME THEATRE DISC PLAYER 2025-2026
MAGNETAR UDP900 MKII

Shared with Hi-Fi: EISA SUBWOOFER 2025-2026
SVS SB17-Ultra R|Evolution

Shared with Mobile: EISA OUTDOOR PROJECTOR 2025-2026
XGIMI MoGo 4

PHOTOGRAPHY EXPERT GROUP

EISA CAMERA OF THE YEAR 2025-2026
Sony Alpha 1 II

EISA PROFESSIONAL CAMERA 2025-2026
Canon EOS R1

EISA FULL-FRAME CAMERA 2025-2026
Canon EOS R5 Mark II

EISA BEST BUY CAMERA 2025-2026
Nikon Z5II

EISA APS-C CAMERA 2025-2026
Nikon Z50II

EISA COMPACT CAMERA 2025-2026
FUJIFILM GFX100RF

EISA PHOTO/VIDEO CAMERA 2025-2026
Panasonic LUMIX S1RII

EISA MICRO FOUR THIRDS CAMERA 2025-2026
OM System OM-3

EISA VLOGGING CAMERA 2025-2026
Canon PowerShot V1

EISA LENS OF THE YEAR 2025-2026
Sony FE 50-150mm F2 GM

EISA BEST BUY LENS 2025-2026
Nikon NIKKOR Z 50mm f/1.4

EISA STANDARD LENS 2025-2026
Canon RF 50mm F1.4L VCM

EISA STANDARD ZOOM LENS 2025-2026
Sony FE 28-70mm F2 GM

EISA PORTRAIT LENS 2025-2026
Sony FE 85mm F1.4 GM II

EISA MACRO LENS 2025-2026
TAMRON 90mm F/2.8 Di III MACRO VXD

EISA PHOTO/VIDEO LENS 2025-2026
Nikon NIKKOR Z 28-135mm f/4 PZ

EISA SUPERZOOM LENS 2025-2026
TAMRON 28-300mm F/4-7.1 Di III VC VXD

EISA TELEPHOTO LENS 2025-2026
FUJIFILM Fujinon XF500mmF5.6 R LM OIS WR

EISA TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2025-2026
Canon RF 70-200mm F2.8L IS USM Z

EISA ULTRA-TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2025-2026
Sigma 300-600mm F4 DG OS | Sports

EISA ULTRA-WIDEANGLE LENS 2025-2026
Sony FE 16mm F1.8 G

EISA WIDE ANGLE LENS 2025-2026
Nikon NIKKOR Z 35mm f/1.2 S

EISA PHOTO ACCESSORY 2025-2026
Canon imagePROGRAF PRO-1100

EISA ANALOG PRODUCT 2025-2026
VALOI easy120 and easy35

EISA PHOTO SOFTWARE 2025-2026
Zoner Studio

Shared with Mobile: EISA PHOTO & VIDEO SMARTPHONE 2025-2026
Xiaomi 15 Ultra

MOBILE DEVICES EXPERT GROUP

EISA SMARTPHONE 2025-2026
HONOR 400

EISA FOLDABLE SMARTPHONE 2025-2026
Motorola Razr 60 Ultra

EISA AI SMARTPHONE 2025-2026
Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra

EISA SMARTWATCH 2025-2026
Huawei Watch 5

EISA TABLET 2025-2026
TCL NXTPAPER 11 Plus

EISA IN-EAR HEADPHONES 2025-2026
Technics EAH-AZ100

EISA PORTABLE LOUDSPEAKER 2025-2026
JBL Flip 7

EISA PORTABLE PROJECTOR 2025-2026
Yaber T1 Pro

EISA NOISE CANCELLING HEADPHONES 2025-2026
Sony WH-1000XM6

Shared with Photo: EISA PHOTO & VIDEO SMARTPHONE 2025-2026
Xiaomi 15 Ultra

Shared with HT&V: EISA OUTDOOR PROJECTOR 2025-2026
XGIMI MoGo 4

IN-CAR ELECTRONICS EXPERT GROUP

EISA IN-CAR SOUND PROCESSOR 2025-2026
Ground Zero GZDSP 6-10SQ

EISA IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2025-2026
STEG K4.01 II

EISA IN-CAR DSP AMPLIFIER 2025-2026
HELIX V EIGHT DSP ULTIMATE

EISA IN-CAR STREAMING AMPLIFIER 2025-2026
ESX QS-TWO-BT

EISA IN-CAR UPGRADE 2025-2026
Musway M6v4

EISA IN-CAR DSP SOFTWARE 2025-2026
DSP PC-Tool 6

EISA IN-CAR INTEGRATION 2025-2026
Musway myCON

EISA IN-CAR HIGH END COMPONENT 2025-2026
Morel Supremo 63 Special Edition

EISA IN-CAR OEM PREMIUM AUDIO

WHERE TO FIND THE EISA WINNERS?

Here we've listed all the winners from the AV and Hi-Fi Expert Groups with their Australian distributor and some handy QR codes to their pages, which should then point you to your nearest local hi-fi or AV store where you can check the winning products in person.

Hegel D50 DAC

▸ Advance Audio: **www.advanceaudio.com.au**

Bluesound NODE ICON streamer

▸ Amber Technology: **www.ambertech.com.au**

Musical Fidelity B1xi amplifier
Musical Fidelity M8x Vinyl
Triangle Borea BR04 bookshelf speakers

▸ Audio Marketing: **www.audiomarketing.com.au**

Hisense 65U7Q PRO, 65U8Q Mini LED TVs
Hisense Hisense M2 Pro projector
Hisense HT SATURN soundbar system
▸ Hisense Australia

Pro-Ject E1.2 turntable
European Audio Team F-Dur turntable
SVS SB17-Ultra R|Evolution subwoofer

▸ Interdyn Brands: **www.interdyn.com.au**

KEF Q Concerto Meta loudspeakers

▸ KEF Australia: **au.kef.com**

Bowers & Wilkins Px7 S3 wireless headphones
Denon AVC-A10H home cinema amp
Denon DP-3000NE, DCD-3000NE & PMA-3000NE
Marantz MODEL 10 integrated amplifier
Marantz MODEL 60n streaming amplifier

▸ Masimo Consumer Australia:
www.bowerswilkins.com/en-au
www.denon.com/en-au
www.marantz.com/en-au

Technics SL-1300G turntable

▸ Panasonic Australia: **www.technics.com/au**

Samsung QE65S95F OLED TV

▸ Samsung Australia: **www.samsung.com.au**

Sennheiser HD 550 headphones

▸ Sennheiser Hearing Australia:
www.sennheiser-hearing.com/en-AU

Sonus faber Sonetto V G2 loudspeakers

▸ Synergy Audio VIsual: **www.synergyaudio.com**

TCL Q65H, 98C8K, 75C7K Mini LED TVs
TCL Q65H soundbar

▸ TCL Australia: **www.tcl.com/au/en**

Philips 55OLED810 OLED TV
Philips 65OLED+950 OLED TV

▸ Tempo: **https://tempo.org**

Audirvāna Studio: https://audirvana.com

Quad 33 & Quad 303 pre/power amplifiers
▸ Audio Visual Revolution: www.avrevolution.com.au

DALI Rubikore Series loudspeakers
Dynaudio Contour 20 Black Edition, Confidence 20A speakers
Radiant Acoustics Clarity 4.2 loudspeakers
FiiO S15 streamer, **FiiO K17** headphone amplifier
▸ BusiSoft AV: www.busisoft.com.au

Eversolo Play streaming amplifier
Eversolo DMP-A10 streamer
▸ Fundamental Audio: www.funaudio.com.au

Focal Diva Utopia streaming loudspeakers
▸ Westan Australia: westan.com.au

Nagaoka MP-700 cartridge
▸ Groove Central: www.groovecentral.com.au

Loewe stellar 65 dr+ OLED TV
Magnetar UDP900 MKII CD player
▸ Indi Imports: hindimports.com

Meze Audio Poet headphones
▸ Radiance Audio VIsual: www.radianceav.com.au

XGIMI MoGo 4 portable projector
▸ XGIMI Australia: xgimi.com.au

Currently unavailable in Australia

Hisense PX3-PRO projector, **Sharp** Q HT-SBW55121 & HT-SPR52021 soundbar, **TCL** 85C9K

SpectraFlora Celata 88

Loudspeakers

- Outstanding bass
- Superb mids & highs
- Bespoke design

- Audition opportunities
- Pricey stands

RRP **$35,000 pair**

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, as goes the famous wedding rhyme, which lists the items a bride is supposed to carry on her wedding day to guarantee a good marriage. It is also applicable to the various technologies and components in SpectraFlora's Celata 88 speaker design… though in this case they are to guarantee sonic, as opposed to marital, bliss.

SOMETHING OLD

To see the 'something old', you need look no further than the speaker cabinet itself, whose angular, bevel-edged shape, topped with an oversized horn, reminds me of the cinema speakers Altec-Lansing used to manufacture back in the 1940s and 50s. SpectraFlora's founder and head designer, Steve Van Sluyter, says the cabinet design is reminiscent of Onken speakers from Japan in the 60s and 70s, but with large front chamfers to reduce edge diffractions for the mid/bass driver, which produces a cleaner sound and better imaging.

SOMETHING NEW

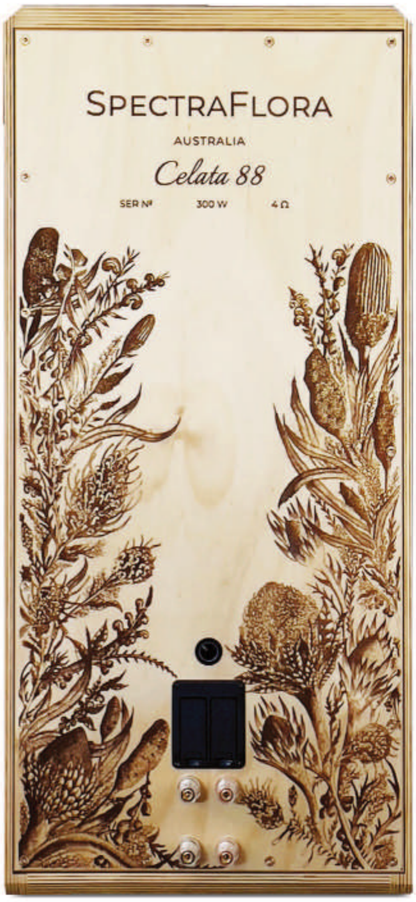
Van Sluyter says that the oversized horn was inspired by the horn designs of Japanese designer Yuichi Arai, whose name we were unfamiliar with. Some internet sleuthing (initially misguided to the website of a Sushi restaurant owned by a famous Japanese chef with the same name!) revealed that Yuichi Arai was famous for designing two 95-degree hyperbolic constant directivity horns — the Arai 480 and the Arai 290, for use with 25mm and 50mm compression drivers respectively. Although Arai has long since retired and shuttered his website, you can still buy his unusually titled speaker design book ('Horn speaker production in the digital age: No need for prototypes! Fully predict actual characteristics through simulation') from Amazon. Unfortunately, it's in Japanese.

You should note that although the devices designed by Arai were certainly horns, and I would describe the device atop the Celata 88 cabinet as a horn, this SpectraFlora design element is actually a waveguide — or, as Van Sluyter prefers to call it, a 'Dynamic Waveguide'. Its design, he says, is the product of two incompatible theories: traditional horn theory, which dates to the early 1900s if not the late 1800s, and modern waveguide theory, which was first promulgated by Dr Earl Geddes, of GedLee Acoustic Science LLC, in 1989.

Like Arai, Geddes has also written several books about speaker design, and they're in English. However, unless you have a physics degree, they may as well be in Japanese, as you might gather for yourself if you care to peruse his chapter on waveguide design: https://tinyurl.com/geddeswaveguide.

Van Sluyter's explanation of how his Dynamic Waveguide works is only marginally less arcane. "The primary goal of a horn is to acoustically couple the driver with air, with directivity control a secondary consideration," he says. "Waveguides are the opposite — they control directivity as their priority, minimising what Geddes called 'Higher Order Modes' that contribute to the honky characteristic of horns. In early listening tests, we liked the dynamics of horns, a result of good acoustic coupling with air, and the intimacy of vocals that direct-radiating tweeters simply cannot match. But we also liked the transparency and constant directivity of waveguides based on Geddes' oblate spheroid profile. So, we tried using a traditional hypex profile vertically with a horizontal oblate spheroid profile, and they worked brilliantly together, [delivering] the dynamics of a horn without the honk, and the transparency and the constant directivity of a waveguide horizontally where it matters most. The 90-degree constant directivity horizontally assures that reflections off walls have the same frequency distribution of direct-radiating sound; the narrow vertical dispersion minimises floor and ceiling reflections. Both help the Celata 88s sound great even in highly resonant rooms."

Nestled in the throat of this waveguide is a 25mm compression driver with a mineral-loaded ketone polymer diaphragm and an 'oversized' 52mm voice coil. "Being oversized," says Van Sluyter, "the diaphragm has to travel less in the voice coil gap than typical 25mm compression



drivers and, as a result, intermodulation distortion is reduced. Further, it has a 110dB-per-watt efficiency, so it's highly attenuated to match up to the mid/bass driver and as a result has far more overhead than a direct-radiating tweeter, many of which would show signs of power compression and distortion when operating at the high sound pressure levels the Celata 88 is able to produce."

SOMETHING BORROWED

Although not unique, the crossover network inside the Celata 88 is certainly rare and unusual. While it is technically a passive crossover, in that it uses traditional inductors, resistors and X capacitors (each network contains 42 capacitors… shades of Douglas Adams), many of the capacitors are DC biased by two 9-volt batteries wired in series to deliver an 18-volt bias voltage. The DC-biasing technique used by SpectraFlora has been 'borrowed' from JBL, but, as Van Sluyter correctly points out, the American brand's patent on the technique has expired, meaning it is free for anyone to use. So why doesn't everyone use it? "The downside to DC biasing is that it is done by doubling the number of capacitors and increasing their capacitance twofold because each pair is in series, both of which add complexity and expense," explains Van Sluyter.

All of this begs the question as to why you would want to use DC bias in the first place. To answer this, it would be best to quote Gregory Timbers, the JBL engineer responsible for patenting the design, which the company marketed as a 'Charge Coupled Linear Definition Dividing Network'. "The benefits of this technology lie in the nature of what applying a charge does to the capacitors themselves," he said. "When an audio signal passing through a capacitor changes polarity — that is, it passes through zero volts — the current flow changes direction, but it does not do so immediately; due to dielectric absorption, the capacitor 'remembers' its previous state and resists the change. This leads to blurring of transients in the drive signal, [which is] a highly audible distortion. Biasing a capacitor ensures that the signal does not reverse the current flow through the capacitor, so zero crossing distortion is eliminated." Timbers often likened the sonic effect to the difference between Class A and Class A/B amplifiers.

DC biasing also creates a piezo-electric force on the plates inside the capacitor that improves the capacitor's performance by minimising the flexing of the plates caused by the signals passing through it, but a discussion of the physics of this phenomenon is certainly beyond the ambit of this review.

SpectraFlora has borrowed intellectual technology from not only JBL but also Swiss acoustic engineer Samuel Harsch. The Celata 88 uses his quasi-transient-perfect crossover topology (which he first described in 2008, so it probably also falls into the 'something new' category) to ensure that the mid/bass driver on the SpectraFlora speaker's front baffle is time-aligned with the compression driver.

"The Dynamic Waveguide and mid/bass [driver] are perfectly time aligned, as opposed to the vast majority of tweeter [and] mid/bass combinations in which the mid/bass lags the tweeter in time," says Van Sluyter. "The result is coherent sound through the crossover point, crisp transients, and true-to-life timbre, especially for percussion and plucked instruments. Surprisingly, even instruments that play fundamental notes many octaves below the 1.3kHz crossover point, such as kick drums and double bass, benefit from the time alignment because their harmonics extend into the range of the Dynamic Waveguide."

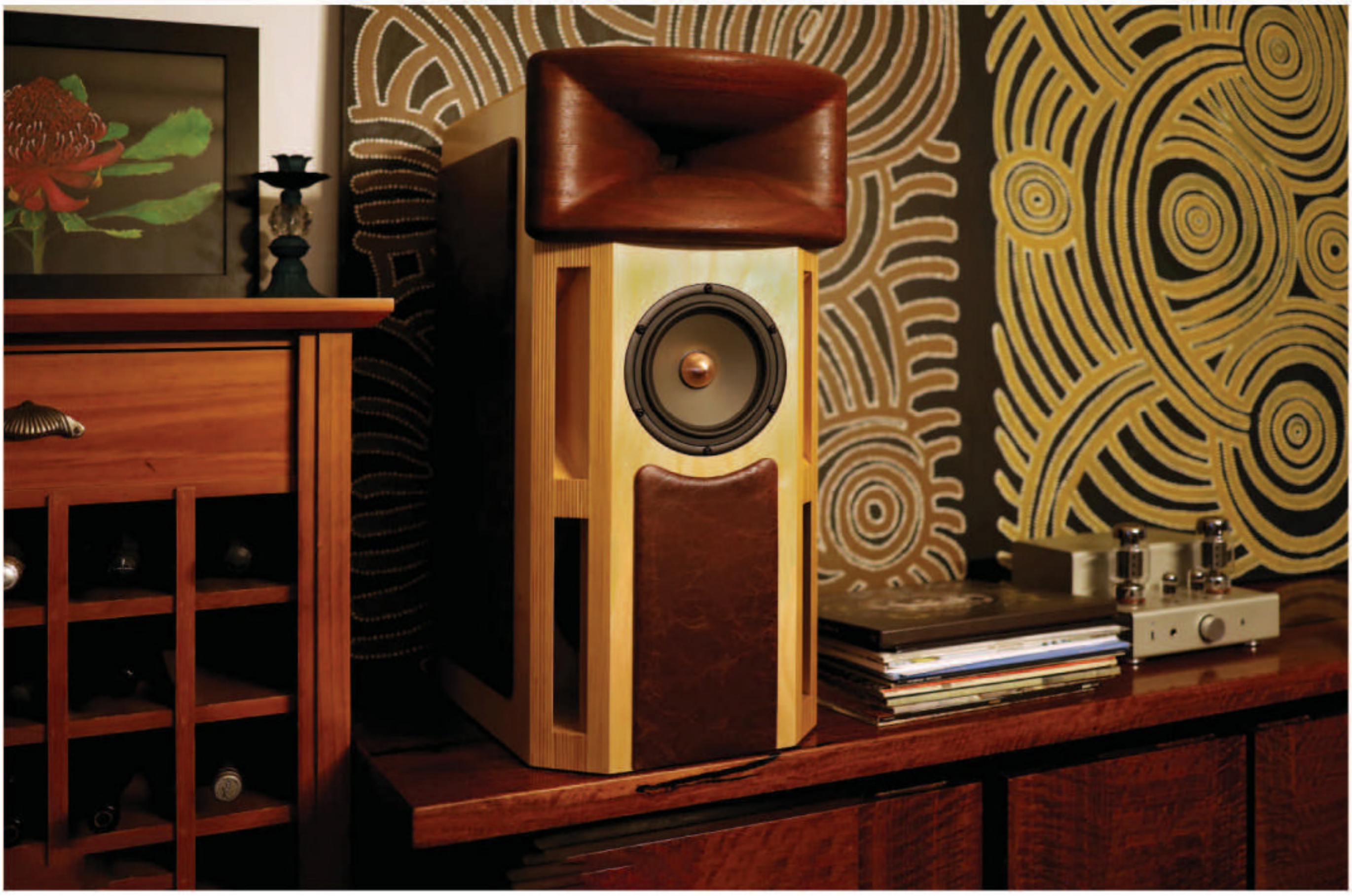
These techniques make the Celata 88's crossover network very large and expensive, not least because all the waveguide capacitors are foil and film, including four custom-made copper foil ones. The mid/bass driver capacitors are all metallised polypropylene (MKP), some of which are bypassed with aluminium foil and film capacitors, including some very high-value ones (because of the low 130Hz crossover point with the bass drivers). The bass driver capacitors are electrolytics bypassed with MKP caps. SpectraFlora had to use electrolytic capacitors in this application due to the smaller physical size of the capacitors required to provide 3,500μF of capacitance. Even so, the size and layout of the Celata 88's crossover meant that the components had to be split over three printed circuit boards, rather than the more typical one.

WHAT'S A MID/BASS DRIVER?

You may possibly wonder why I refer to that driver visible on the front baffle as a 'mid/bass'. Well, it's simply that it is neither a midrange driver nor a bass driver, but a bit of both.

You see, it isn't truly a bass unit because, while it does deliver some bass frequencies, most of the low-end is delivered by a pair of slot-loaded, axially aligned 204mm bass drivers, hidden away deep within the cabinet. SpectraFlora refers to these drivers as 'subwoofers', but since they have very little output below 20Hz I would call that description a bit of a stretch. They essentially operate from 30Hz up to 130Hz.

As you've probably now realised, it isn't truly a midrange unit either because, unlike most, which typically only start operating above 300Hz, the Celata 88's mid/bass



driver starts operating at 130Hz, after which it continues up to 1300Hz before handing over to the compression driver in the waveguide.

The mid/bass driver itself is a 180mm unit, made by SEAS and with a graphene-coated magnesium cone. As you can see from the images accompanying this review, there is no dust cap at the cone's centre but instead a copper-plated phase plug. The driver has a 39mm titanium voice coil former with a long copper winding and large linear excursion (14mm linear, 26mm maximum), facilitated by a reinforced rubber surround. The overall diameter is actually slightly smaller than the listed one, at 176mm. The Thiele/Small diameter is 135mm, giving an effective cone area of 136cm^2 (slightly less than expected because of the absence of a dustcap).

It's housed in its own enclosure, which is ported via the two rectangular slots at either side of the driver. The two rectangular slots below these deliver the output from the two aforementioned axially aligned 204mm drivers.

Although not unique, the crossover network is certainly rare and unusual... many of the capacitors are DC biased by two 9-volt batteries wired in series

UNUSUAL BASS CONFIGURATION

This pair of slot-loaded drivers is arranged in a rather unusual push-pull configuration. This creates a 6th-order band-pass filter that delivers 2dB of gain, but, unusually, both drivers face the same direction, so you don't get the benefit of force cancellation. This directionality was, Van Sluyter says, necessary to fit them into the compact cabinet: "Sonically, the benefit of push-pull subwoofers is that even-order harmonic distortion cancels out, which is the commonly cited reason push-pull woofers sound good. However, we believe an additional reason for their superior sound compared to direct-radiating woofers is that two cones working in opposition provide a sort of negative feedback that reduces overshoot and ringing. In other words, they produce crisp, clean bass that is well matched to the mid/bass."

I should point out that, although I call this configuration 'unusual', it is actually one that a great many high-end loudspeaker manufacturers have employed at one time or another. In fact, Dali once used it across a complete loudspeaker range.

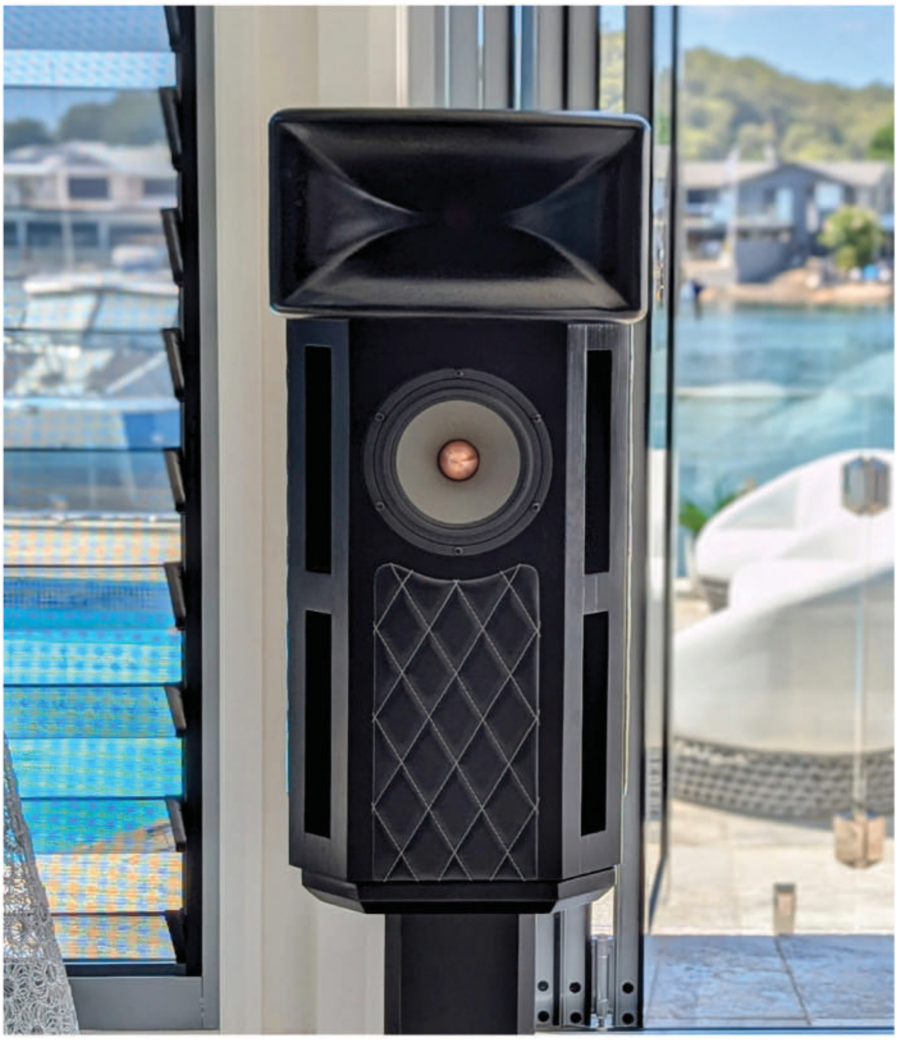
FINISHES

You don't need me to tell you that the Celata 88's cabinets are wood-working masterpieces, with the Dynamic Waveguide and several other features sporting shapes so complex they have to be created with a 7-axis CNC robotic machine. You literally could not create them by hand or with conventional cabinet-making machinery.

The timber used is responsibly sourced here in Australia, with the plywood made from hoop pine (*araucaria cunninghamii*), plantation-grown in Queensland. SpectraFlora also uses plantation-grown Northern silky oak (*cardwellia sublimis*) and sometimes salvaged timber. It currently employs salvaged timber (*red ironbark/ eucalyptus sideroxylon*) in its 'Limited Range'.

At the time of writing, SpectraFlora sells two 'Limited Range' models — a black-stained pair with diamond-stitched leather and a silky oak Dynamic Waveguide, and a natural, clear satin polyurethane-finished pair with highly veined cherry leather and a red ironbark Dynamic Waveguide finished with hardwax oil.

The red ironbark timber was salvaged from a former Royal Australian Air Force



base in Dubbo, New South Wales, built during WWII. Pricing for these limited models is $38,000 per pair, plus $1,000 for matching stands.

Should these models not be available at the time you are reading this review, SpectraFlora says it can customise its speakers specifically for your application, offering various colours of stain for the cabinet and waveguide, painted finishes, and leather or fabric exterior panels. Custom designs are priced per project and require a $10,000 deposit before fabrication commences.

CONNECTIONS

Around the rear are two pairs of high-quality multi-way speaker terminals. In a standard configuration, the lower pair drives the dual internal drivers while the upper pair takes care of the front-firing mid/bass driver and the waveguide. The two sections are linked via gold-plated bus-bars. These terminals can, however, be changed so that the upper terminals connect directly to the waveguide.

Above the speaker terminals are two fold-down compartments holding the 9V batteries that provide the voltage to bias the capacitors in the crossover. You would be best advised to use either Alkaline or Lithium batteries, but you needn't worry about replacing them regularly, as the load presented by the network is such that the batteries will essentially operate for whatever shelf life is printed on the battery, so you'll only need to replace them every five or ten years!

Above the dual battery compartments is a small push-button enabling you to adjust the loudspeakers' frequency balance by boosting the waveguide's treble output. 'The button on the back provides a treble boost designed to benefit listeners with hearing loss, particularly age-related, at high frequencies,' according to SpectraFlora literature.

Above this is a glorious floral design that is CNC-routed into the cabinet and stained. It's certainly very clever and beautiful. The only pity is that it appears on the back of the speaker, where it will rarely — if ever — be visible.

LISTENING SESSIONS

I initially set up the Celata 88 on stands some distance from the rear wall of my listening room, and was immediately impressed by both the bass quality and extension. Indeed, I cannot remember when I last heard similarly sized speakers capable of delivering such low frequencies. Still, I believed that the low-end would benefit from some boundary-loading, so I moved the speakers backwards, almost to the wall, and were gratified to hear that the sonic quality remained while the volume of the deepest bass increased, as did the extension. I was also pleased to hear that the Celata 88's stereo image did not narrow, as often happens when speaker cabinets are put close to a wall. I can only put this unusual attribute down to the unique waveguide.

That the Celata 88 performed optimally so close to a rear wall is a huge plus in my book. After all, the last thing you want to be doing with your speakers is moving them out of the way for your day-to-day routine, only to have to move them back into their 'optimal' position whenever you want to do some serious listening, which is what you have to do with most standmounts.

Listening to Steve Hackett's classic album Defector was all it took for me to appreciate the speakers' ability to deliver superb bass. The Celata 88 made it child's play to hear the difference between Dik Cadbury's bass guitar and his Moog Taurus, while the sound from John Shearer's drum kit was simply amazingly delivered. The speed of his sticks on the track *Slogans* is almost unbelievable, yet the Celata 88's drivers not only kept up with the pace but also delivered the dynamics of the myriad transients. With Nick Magnus's keyboard work on the same track, his finger-work is insanely good, and the precision of the delivery of the SpectraFloras lets me appreciate every single note.

If you aren't a prog-rock fan, you will also hear the extent of the Celata 88's

You don't need me to tell you that the Celata 88's cabinets are wood-working masterpieces... so complex they have to be created with a CNC robotic machine superb bass detail and extension by listening to Massive Attack's Mezzanine. Opening track *Angel* is a perfect vehicle, but don't miss how well the speakers deliver the underlying atmospherics. Listen to the clarity of the sound in the lead-up to *Teardrop*, too, and the perfection of Elizabeth Fraser's vocal projection through the tapestry of sound. And don't miss how the waveguide can reproduce the Morse code-like 'beeping' in the background so that it's always audible, and without disturbing the mix.

Speaking of which, the articulation of the compression driver means that all the frequencies within its compass are delivered with jaw-dropping precision, not to mention crisply, cleanly and without a hint of the 'sizzle' that can tarnish the treble delivery of conventional tweeters, particularly those of the metal-domed variety. (And if you do want 'sizzle', it will only be a matter of pushing those rear buttons to give the highs a boost. I would not recommend this, though, as the boost is absolutely massive — in my mind, to 'overkill' levels.)

The compression driver's articulation is splendidly exemplified on Steely Dan's rightly lauded Aja, which deservedly won a Grammy for Best Engineered Recording. Altogether, it took 40 musicians to get it onto vinyl (it was 1978, after all), and their contributions are all honoured by the performance of the SpectraFlora speakers. Despite the articulation, there's still a natural and very pleasing warmth to the delivery of the upper mids and lower highs that is totally aurally satisfying.

You will need to ensure your amplification is up to scratch if you want to extract the best performance from the Celata 88, because they are not overly efficient (SpectraFlora's specification is 86dBSPL) and their impedance is lower than average, remaining below six ohms over almost the entire audio spectrum.

CONCLUSION

So I am very close to the end of this review and haven't yet explained what that 'something blue' inside the speaker might be. Well, it's the colour of some of the capacitors in the Celata 88's crossover! However, I must say that I started feeling a little blue upon learning how much I would have to dip into my savings to own a pair of Celata 88, because I had wanted to purchase the review pair rather than send them back. (How's that for a recommendation?)

After all, I had never heard such good sound — or so much deep bass! — from a pair of speakers so small, room-friendly and good-looking that my better half would allow them to grace our living room's decor, rather than banish them to my 'audiophile den' like most of the review kit that passes through our door.

Sure, the SpectraFlora Celata 88's significant asking price means that if speaker size is not an issue for you (or your significant other), many very large and very good-sounding floorstanders around this similarly lofty level could complicate your buying decision. But if cabinet size is indeed a deciding factor, you need neither look nor listen any further... just choose your preferred finish! ***Greg Borrowman***

SPECS & CONTACT

Price: $35,000/pair (speakers); $1,000/pair (stands); $38,000/pair (limited-range)
Warranty: 3 years
Drivers: 2x 8-inch subwoofers; 7-inch mid/bass, graphene-coated magnesium cone; 1-inch compression driver with oversized, 52mm voice coil and mineral loaded ketone polymer diaphragm
Frequency range: 33Hz(-3dB)-20kHz
Impedance: 4 ohms
Sensitivity: 86dB
Crossovers: 130Hz, 1300Hz
Recommended amplifiers: >40W tube; >70W solid-state Class A or A/B
Maximum power: 300W (peak)
Dimensions (hwd): 71.7 x 35.3 x 44.8cm
Weight: 46kg

Contact: SpectraFlora
T: (04) 1265 3966
E: steve@spectraflora.com
W: www.spectraflora.com

Readers interested in a full technical appraisal of the performance of the SpectraFlora Celata 88 loudspeakers should continue on and read the **LABORATORY TEST REPORT** published on this (and the following) page. Readers should note that the results mentioned in the report, tabulated in performance charts and/or displayed using graphs and/or photographs should be construed as applying only to the specific sample tested.

Laboratory Test Report

The in-room frequency response measured by *Newport Test Labs* for the SpectraFlora Celata 88 loudspeakers is shown in Graph 1 overpage. The response was measured using pink noise as the signal source, and the trace shown is the average of nine individual measurements, made in a grid fashion with the centre of the grid on axis with the speakers' compression driver at the throat of the Dynamic Waveguide.

The response shown extends from 28Hz to 20kHz ±5dB, which is an excellent result, however the loudspeakers were tested when placed in the centre of the room, so there were no nearby boundaries, plus they were elevated well above floor level. If they had been positioned on stands, close to a wall, the response would easily deliver a result of 28Hz to 20kHz ±3dB.

Graph 2 shows only the Celata 88's high-frequency response, both for the 0dB setting of the rear-panel button (purple trace) and with the button set to 'Boost' (green trace). The response was gained using a gated sine wave, smoothed to one-third octave via post-processing. You can see that the 0dB response is exceptionally smooth and linear, and essentially contained within a ±2.5dB envelope between 1kHz and 15kHz, with a slight rise through 20kHz to peak at 22kHz before rolling off.

The 'boost', meanwhile, starts quite small at the crossover frequency (1.3kHz), but gradually becomes increasingly higher until, at 13kHz, it is a full 11dB higher than the unboosted frequency response.

Three near-field low-frequency response measurements for the Celata 88 are shown in Graph 3, but note that the actual levels are not accurate because the traces have not been adjusted to compensate for the differences in

> Power the Celata 88 with an amplifier that is comfortable with driving 4-ohm loads and has a power output of roughly 80-100W PC

the radiating areas. Also, the near-field technique is not accurate for the mid/bass response above 350Hz (the roll-off shown is actually a measurement artefact); the graphing limit required extending in order to show the resonances at 250Hz and 525Hz.

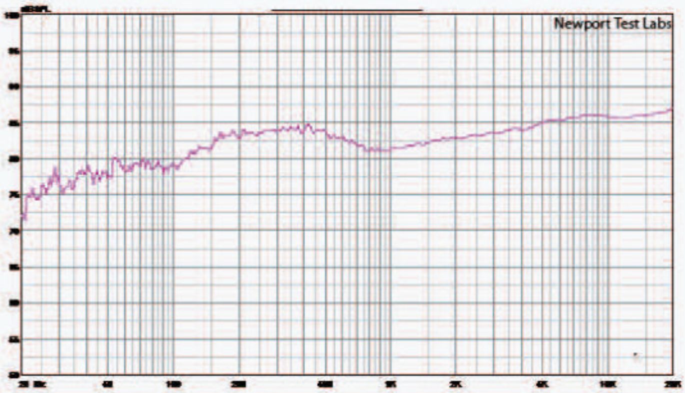
Meanwhile, Graph 4 reveals that the SpectraFlora speakers' overall impedance (red trace) is low, essentially remaining below 6.5 ohms from 25Hz up to the graphing limit of 40kHz. It also dips to 3.5 ohms at 32Hz and 3.4 ohms at 25kHz. It is most certainly a nominally 4-ohm design, as specified by SpectraFlora.

The measurements of the individual LF (green trace) and HF (blue trace) sections of the speaker show the lower crossover frequency is exactly as specified, too, at 130Hz. The phase angle (pink trace) is exceptionally well controlled. Indeed, it's the best-controlled one I can ever recall seeing.

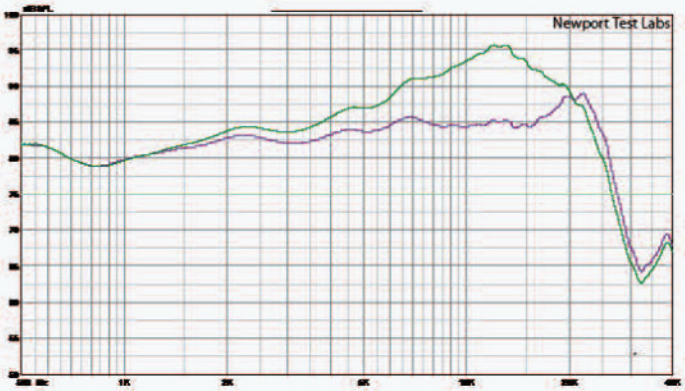
Graph 5 is a composite that gathers the responses resulting from the various measurement techniques and displays them in one place for comparison purposes.

Newport Test Labs measured the sensitivity of the Celata 88 design using its standard and very stringent measurement technique, reporting a sound pressure level measurement of 84.8dBSPL at a distance of one metre, for an input of 2.83Veq. This is quite a bit lower than the average for large floorstanders (87dBSPL) and a little lower than the average for smaller bookshelf designs (86dBSPL). This combination of impedance and sensitivity means that it would be preferable to power the Celata 88 with an amplifier that is comfortable with driving 4-ohm loads and has a power output of roughly 80–100 watts per channel.

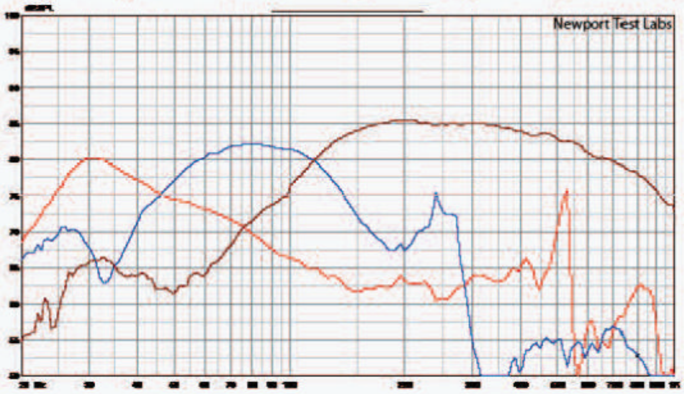
Overall, the SpectraFlora Celata 88 performed very well across all the tests performed by *Newport Test Labs*, returning a generally flat and linear frequency response that was notably extended into the extreme low frequencies. **Steve Holding**



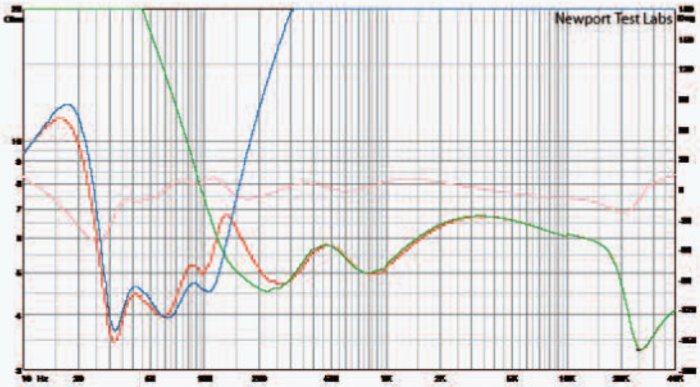
Graph 1. In-room free-field frequency response



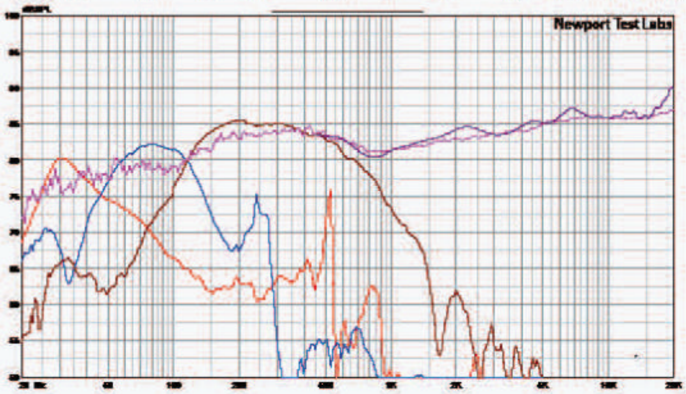
Graph 2. High-frequency response with x/o flat (purple trace) and x/o boosted (green)



Graph 3. Near-field LF response. Upper port (red), lower port (blue), driver (brown)



Graph 4. Impedance and phase angle: System (red); LF section (blue); HF section (green); Phase (pink)



Graph 5. Composite frequency response

Take A Seat With Rainer Finck

The 30-year Marantz engineer and original developer of the Philips Bitstream DAC reveals his many hi-fi career highlights...

Few electronics engineers can boast a CV and reputation as esteemed as Rainer Finck's. In the mid-1980s, his career got off to a flyer as an application engineer at Philips Semiconductors, where he helped develop the original Bitstream Conversion method, which primarily paved the path for SACD and DSD.

The 90s then saw Finck take his digital audio expertise to Marantz, where for 30 years he designed and engineered several of the brand's most famous products, alongside fellow Marantz legend, the late Ken Ishiwata.

It's an illustrious 40-year (and counting) career that you won't be surprised to hear isn't short of proud moments and milestones. On his return from the High End Munich show in May, I asked Finck to name some of the products he is most proud to have developed.

THE PHILIPS YEARS (1985-1990)

It makes sense to begin where it all started for Finck: in the 'radio/audio' department of Philips Semiconductors in Hamburg. This was, of course, the time in which CD became the trendy technology, and consequently Philips expanded that department, involving Finck in digital-to-analogue conversion projects.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and today we can truly appreciate the fruits that came from Finck and the rest of the original Philips Bitstream team's labour back then. "My task was to get the new first generation of bitstream DACs of Philips to the same level as its famous 'golden crown' TDA1541," said Finck. The TDA1541 had been developed in the early 80s and was the reference 16-bit digital-to-analogue converter chip, found inside famous CD players like the Marantz CD-7, Cambridge Audio CD1 and Meridian 207.

But times were a'changing, and the goal had become to replace the 16-bit digital-to-analogue conversion technique, which used 16 resistors that inherently allowed room for errors in the code conversion, producing 'poor linearity' and thus introducing 'non-linearity distortion'.

The Bitstream method Philips developed was a technique that, to put it rather crudely, converted the 16-bit signal into a one-bit code of '0' and '1', oversampled it (256 times), used noise shaping to reduce the noise created in that process, and then used Pulse Density Modulation (PDM) to create a waveform that could be passed through a low-pass filter to obtain an analogue signal.

"We succeeded in doing this, and the technology behind this is today called DSD256. The learnings of this first project went into the second generation of DACs that were built with 'differential' outputs. Since then, multi-bit DACs disappeared from the market, and today about 90% of the DACs are built 'differential' and use a hybrid of bitstream and other newer technologies."

MARANTZ CD-7 (1998-2000)

After five years in the lab, Finck sought a change, and it just so happened that Marantz's German office in Frankfurt had closed and moved to Hamburg. The company was hiring almost an entire fleet of staff...

"My first job at Marantz Germany was as a product manager. But Ken Ishiwata knew about my background at Philips and challenged me with all kinds of questions," recalls Finck. "One of them was about the side effects and sound quality of digital filters in CD players. For our first setup to test this out, we modified an existing CD player with a DSP. We programmed 'analog' filters — filters with all kinds of characteristics — and came to the conclusion that most of them had audible effects: some positive, some negative.

"At the end, we liked the characteristics of a phase-corrected analog filter best, and the marketing name became — LMF (Linear Music Filter). This was first introduced in the Marantz CD-7."

One of the best-performing CD players in history, the CD-7 was an integrated (rather than two-box) CD player that would stand as Marantz's last reference model and carry legendary status. It actually eschewed the then-emerging single-bit conversion for tried and tested multi-bit, and was indeed the final Marantz player built with the "Golden Crown" (as Finck puts it) TDA1541 chip, which was shortly after discontinued by Philips.

"For quite a number of people, the CD-7 was the best Marantz CD player. It is today a collector's item," says Finck. "What made it really special is the fact that we improved its low-level performance by using it in a kind of Class A mode... which was so far a nice little secret!"

MARANTZ TT-15 (2006-TODAY)

Comparatively less celebrated today, yet cemented as one of Finck's most memorable achievements, is the Marantz TT-15 turntable, which joined the PM-11 integrated and SA-11 SACD player in the company's Reference series at that time. Perhaps it was notable — and an accomplishment — alone that it was greenlit in 2004...

"About two years before its introduction, when I was managing director of Marantz Germany, I asked my boss for a turntable to complement the Reference line-up," says Finck. "Imagine... it was two decades before today's vinyl boom! Except for Ken, who supported me, everybody else in Europe called me crazy. But we found a way to realise the TT-15 without tooling costs

The latest iteration of the Marantz TT-15

and huge investments, and got a go."

The TT-15 was actually produced by Clearaudio, a collaboration that Finck tells me started at the Golden Ear Awards ceremony of German magazine *AUDIO,* where he and Clearaudio owner Robert Suchy discussed the then-current and forecasted state of the vinyl market.

"All marketing experts had already forecasted the death of vinyl and turntables before the millennium," says Finck. "But we could see that an increasing number of new albums had been produced in small numbers on vinyl again. It was nothing comparable to the boom of the past couple of years, but it was clearly not fading out."

The result of that discussion and the ensuing melding of two creative minds produced a turntable that had "nothing (or very little) to do with any of their [Clearaudio's] products," says Finck. "A win-win for Clearaudio and Marantz.

"After we showed it at the High End show in Munich, every sales organisation in Europe and also the US and Japan wanted it," he continues. "And guess what? It is still in production!"

MARANTZ SA-10 (2017-2024)

I told you Finck had had a hand or two in several famous Marantz releases…

Another product that, for many hi-fi fans, needs little introduction, the SA-10 disc player arrived in 2017 as one of the best digital source components around, It has only recently been succeeded by the new 10 Series SACD player.

After the best part of two decades designing Marantz products, Finck was at this time building Boston Acoustics, a sister audio brand also under the Sound United ownership, in Europe. A busy time, he tells us, but that didn't stop him from entertaining another little provocation from Ishiwata: "Can we do our own DAC?" And so began a side project for Finck.

"A little bit of programming and we had some tools to convert our music files to DSD and could compare all kinds of digital filters and noise shapers," says Finck. "I did some tests on how to convert the bitstream into analogue, and with a simple trick it was possible to achieve measurement results on a similar level to the high-end converters on the market."

That trick was indeed patented in the US and UK, and is still pending in Europe. This proprietary technology — Marantz Musical Mastering (MMM), to give the brand's marketing team another approving nod — incorporated elements of the single-bit conversion it had used in the past, but advanced it through new filtering techniques and upconversion.

Having made its debut in the SA-10, MMM was carried into subsequent Marantz digital products (such as the SA-KI Ruby player) and is still applied in current creations, including the 30n SACD player/streamer. So the SA-10 left quite a legacy and, as Finck rightly acknowledges, brought Marantz quite some fame.

MARANTZ KI RUBY (2019-2021)

To celebrate his 40th anniversary at Marantz, Ishiwata designed and released the SA-KI Ruby disc player and PM-KI Ruby amplifier (the KI Pearl Lite amplifier and player were introduced a decade earlier to mark his 30th anniversary, and I actually still have the duo at home!)

The duo drew on technology found in the brand's then-flagship models, with the amplifier implementing a moving-magnet and moving-coil phono stage with the brand's new phono EQ circuitry design. "Ken was a vinyl lover, and as a special for him, I spent quite some effort to get a special phono stage into the product," says Finck. "To my knowledge, it was the first time Marantz used a discrete MM phono stage without global feedback. We managed to get it done without poor measurement performance."

MARANTZ 6006 SERIES UK EDITION (2020)

Last but not least among Finck's product picks is another amplifier and disc player set. This time, the pairing is at the other end of the price spectrum, and also rather unusual in both concept and name; it was created as a sort of response to the repercussions of Brexit.

"We needed something to replace the 6006 Series after the British Pound made a dive due to the vote," explains Finck of the time when prices in the UK were, all of a sudden, far lower than in the rest of Europe. He had a rather good foundation from which to work for these 6006 UK Edition products, of course, with the 2016-launched 6006 Series components (the CD6006 CD player and PM6006 amplifier) having racked up accolades from various hi-fi publications.

But building up from that wasn't without its hurdles. First, Finck was on his own, with Ishiwata having been hospitalised in China. And second, time was of the essence as Marantz wanted the 6006 UK Edition products to be ready in time to be nominated for that year's *What Hi-Fi?* Awards season. "I had only a couple of months to find ways to improve on already very good products, but the typical 'SE' [Special Edition] treatment was most likely not enough to bring prices up and justify the price increase," he recalls.

In the end, he tells me, he found a way to improve the power amplification section of the integrated through "a relatively simple modification (circuit change) that improved the dynamic behaviour and reduced temperature drift". Similarly, with the CD player, he was able to "reduce the noise on the analogue power supply further, and add some minor changes here and there to fine-tune the sound characteristics.

Marantz SA-10

marantz
CD
-22.0

Finck's former colleague, the late Ken Ishiwata, with Marantz's KI Ruby

Ken Ishiwata
marantz
KI RUBY

> "I asked my boss for a turntable… it was two decades before today's vinyl boom! Everybody called me crazy"

"The challenge for these kinds of products is always finding the right balance without adding huge cost," says Finck. It was a success, evident by not only the consequent acclaim of both components but also the fact that many of those changes carried into the equally celebrated (and current!) next-generation models, the PM6007/CD6007.

"This was something special as it is compared to the rest of the most affordable solutions that have arrived in the past five/six years," says Finck. "It's enjoyed and entertained by far the highest number of people and is, for sure, the most popular and well-known product in the UK."

You see, quite the CV! But after three decades, Finck's Marantz (and Sound United) chapter closed when Masimo (who acquired Sound United in 2022 and who now intends to sell it on to Harman International) closed the 'Innovation and Research' team he was part of.

But when a chapter closes and, despite retirement knocking on the door, you are still passionate about and dedicated to designing products, another one opens. For Finck, that is at FinkTeam, where he works today. The speaker manufacturer is now led by Norbert Theisges but was founded by Karl-Heinz Fink, and it's work lies in the origins of Fink Audio-Consulting, one of the most influential and least well-known companies in the global loudspeaker market. Indeed, some years ago one of my colleagues called it "the most important speaker company you've never heard of".

To provide some context then, the Fink Audio engineering consultancy, which for decades has designed, engineereed and even facilitated the manufacture of loudspeakers for its clients, is responsible for some of the finest speakers in the past 20 or so years, from the likes of Tannoy, Wharfedale, Mission and Q Acoustics. If you have ever sat in a modern Volkswagen Group car, there is a fair chance you've listened to something in it that has been designed by Fink Audio, too.

FinkTeam launched its first speakers, the WM-4, in 2017 (the 'WM' a tongue-in-cheek abbreviation for 'washing machine' due to the size of the bass drivers!), followed by the current Borg ($52,995) in 2018 and the Kim bookshelf speakers ($21,495) in 2020. In Australia, the brand's speakers are distributed by Hi-Fi Collective in Melbourne. Anyway, I digress…

Finck and Fink have worked together on various projects over the years, as the latter did some consultancy work for Marantz (and other Sound United brand) speakers yonks ago, but now their working relationship can really blossom over at FinkTeam in Essen, Germany.

"We have now some interesting projects where I can work on electronics and he on speakers," Finck says. "So it's a perfect match and some fun before retirement!"

I'd say! **_Becky Roberts_**

Marantz CD6006

comicopera
robertwyatt
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
MAGIC
Howlin
Magnifi
THE UNFAIRGROUND
KEVIN AYERS
FLEET FOXES
Sunday at Devil Dirt
ISOBEL CAMPBELL & MARK LANEGAN
NICK CAVE & THE BAD SEEDS
DIG!!! LAZARUS DIG!!!
STEPHEN MALKMUS & THE JICKS
REAL EMOTIONAL TRASH
JOAN AS POLICE WOMAN
TO SURVIVE
IN RAINBOWS
RADIOHEAD
Brighter Than Creation's Dark
Wild Beasts
LIMBO, PANTO
Bon Iver
22 DREAMS
Raising Sand
Brother
marantz
CD PLAYER CD6007
DISPLAY OFF
02Tr 00:15
PHONES
LEVEL
DISC/INPUT
5V/1A

6 CD player buying tips if you want to revive your disc collection

Many of you reading this will inevitably still have a lot of love for CDs. I certainly do. If you don't find network streaming to be sonically satisfying and haven't been swept up by the vinyl revival, the CD is probably still your format of choice.

If you want to prioritise hearing your current CD collection (or to-be-revived old discs) at their best, you will need a high-quality dedicated CD player. So if your ol' player is long past its best (or even working stage) or you, regrettably or not, took it to a charity store years ago, it's time to shop.

Naturally, there aren't as many CD players being made as there used to be 20 or even 10 years ago, and what is available will have to suit your budget, of course. But beyond setting a budget limit and knowing your system's requirements, what else should you consider when shopping for a CD player? What connections, features and design elements are important? Are some specifications more significant than others? And how do you ensure it will work for years (or decades) to come?

Here are some practical tips and general advice to heed when thinking about buying a CD player today...

1 Don't skimp on the price

It may be tempting simply to use your old DVD player, the disc player on your PS5 or a cheap CD-ROM drive, but I wouldn't go for the cheap option here. If sound quality is your priority — and I think it should be — it will be much more rewarding to aim for something beyond "it will just work".

Blu-ray players, game consoles and CD-

Rega's Saturn MK3 is one of few players today with a top-loading mechanism, which looks good but does compete for a rack's top shelf.

ROM drives in your laptop are multi-tasking tools that aren't purpose-built for hi-fi listening. They prioritise gaming, visuals, computational power etc; audio fidelity won't be prioritised here, and they won't sound as good as a dedicated player.

You don't have to pay thousands to get good sound, either. At the bare minimum, I would recommend opting for a 'budget' CD player, such as the Marantz CD6007 at $1,000. It helps that it has a rich hi-fi heritage behind it, and this Marantz is a long-running, multi-award-winning unit that delivers an engaging, insightful and large-scaled sound when playing CDs. Go up the price ladder and you'll find options from the likes of Arcam, Cyrus, Naim, Technics and TEAC… but this well-built Marantz is a good place to start if your budget is strict.

2

Buy from a company that is likely to support it for years into the future

Manufacturers with a proven track record of servicing products are a sensible place to start looking. A CD player's biggest weakness is its disc drive, with the longevity of the disc mechanism always a point of contention. Therefore, if it has any issues, you'll want to be able to contact the brand so that it can service it with the right parts.

That sets it apart from a modern music streamer, which doesn't have mechanical moving parts. So if you want your CD player to last a long time, it is important to buy from a company that isn't a flash-in-the-pan or short-lived, or one with no ability to service their products.

Cyrus Audio, for instance, has a dedicated page on its website about product servicing. Look for similar web support pages from the manufacturer you are considering buying a CD player from.

3

Does it play the disc format you have?

Not every CD player can play every single CD format. All will play the standard CD disc, but if your music collection includes many CD-R and CD-RW discs, you need to make sure that the CD player will support them.

This is especially true if you have a healthy SACD library — always double-check that the player can play this format, as it's not always the case that a pricier model will play all formats. Again, check the manufacturer's site for the player's technical specification to make sure it can play the essential CD formats you have and will be using.

4

Don't get tied up with the latest and greatest DAC chips of today

DAC chips are important, but it is only a smart part of the CD player's circuitry, design and overall performance. So many other things contribute to the sound quality of a CD player, such as the analogue output section. How a player is tuned is also more important. Ultimately, it is a combination of the components chosen and the engineers' testing and tuning that results in how good a player sounds.

The newest DAC chips don't necessarily sound better either, as most aren't designed specifically for the hi-fi industry — they are designed for computing and gaming, where sound quality isn't as important. So it's best to look at, and listen to, the CD player as a whole and ensure it is delivering the audio performance that speaks to you most.

5

Digital inputs are handy

If you want to extend the usefulness of your CD player, make sure it has digital inputs. This gives you scope to plug in other digital sources — a music streamer, computer, set-top box or even radio — and take advantage of your CD player's built-in DAC. This is especially true if you have invested in a high-quality premium CD spinner, as a dedicated audio source will likely have lavished more care on its DAC circuitry than such other multi-tasking products.

For instance, if you decide to get into hi-res wireless streaming, you can simply opt for a network bridge (i.e. a streamer without the DAC) that gives you all the streaming essentials while your CD player handles all the digital conversion and analogue output.

Even budget options such as the WiiM Pro Plus streamer can benefit from better sound if you bypass its digital section and use a better-performing DAC in an alternative connected product instead.

6

Top, slot, tray – does the disc loading mechanism matter?

Honestly? Not a jot. This is entirely up to your personal preference, as the disc-loading mechanism has no bearing on the CD player's sound quality. One method isn't better than another; it simply depends on what is currently available. As relatively few CD players are being made today, your choice might be restricted depending on what mechanisms are available for manufacturers to use.

Other aspects of a CD player — whether it has a display or not, whether it has physical or touch-capacitative buttons, and how noisy the disc-loading mechanism is — are all down to personal preference rather than relating to sound quality. Just make sure they all work properly and deliver the satisfying CD experience you crave.

Kash Kabir

CAUTION
MOUNT UNIT ON SOLID SURFACE. DO NOT REMOVE SCREWS OR COVERS UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.
NO USER SERVICEABLE COMPONENTS INSIDE. REFER SERVICING TO QUALIFIED ENGINEER.
SEE OWNERS MANUAL FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.
THIS PRODUCT COMPLIES WITH DHHS RULES 21 CFR, CHAPTER 1, SUBCHAPTER J, PART 1040 AT DATE OF MANUFACTURE.
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L
R
DIGITAL OUTPUTS
OPTICAL
SPDIF
DIGITAL INPUTS
OPTICAL
SPDIF
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24 BIT / 96 kHz
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UPSAMPLING 24 BIT 192KHz DUAL DIFFERENTIAL DAC CD PLAYER
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73

Everything you need to know about Qobuz Connect

Qobuz Connect is finally here, and it's been quite the wait for the French hi-res music service to launch this much-anticipated feature...

Qobuz tends to be the audiophile's music streaming service of choice, thanks to its extensive high-resolution and CD-quality catalogue, adjacent download store for hi-res albums, and detailed, spacious sound quality. The French platform is supported in a wide variety of hi-fi products, too — across pretty much every major manufacturer that supports network streaming, and even many niche ones.

A 'Connect' feature, which lets you stream music directly from the app to your hi-fi product over the network for easier and lossless hi-res playback, has long been on the wishlist for Qobuz subscribers. After all, Spotify Connect has been available since 2013, while Tidal Connect appeared later in 2020. Both are supported by various wireless speakers, music streamers and other network-connected components and systems.

The long-anticipated Qobuz Connect was in the works for years — indeed, rumours and beta versions were mentioned in various online hi-fi forums for many months before its official launch at the High End Munich show in May.

So now that it is fully and widely available across products, here's everything you need to know about how to benefit from the new feature, which brands and kinds of devices support it, and what you can expect when using it...

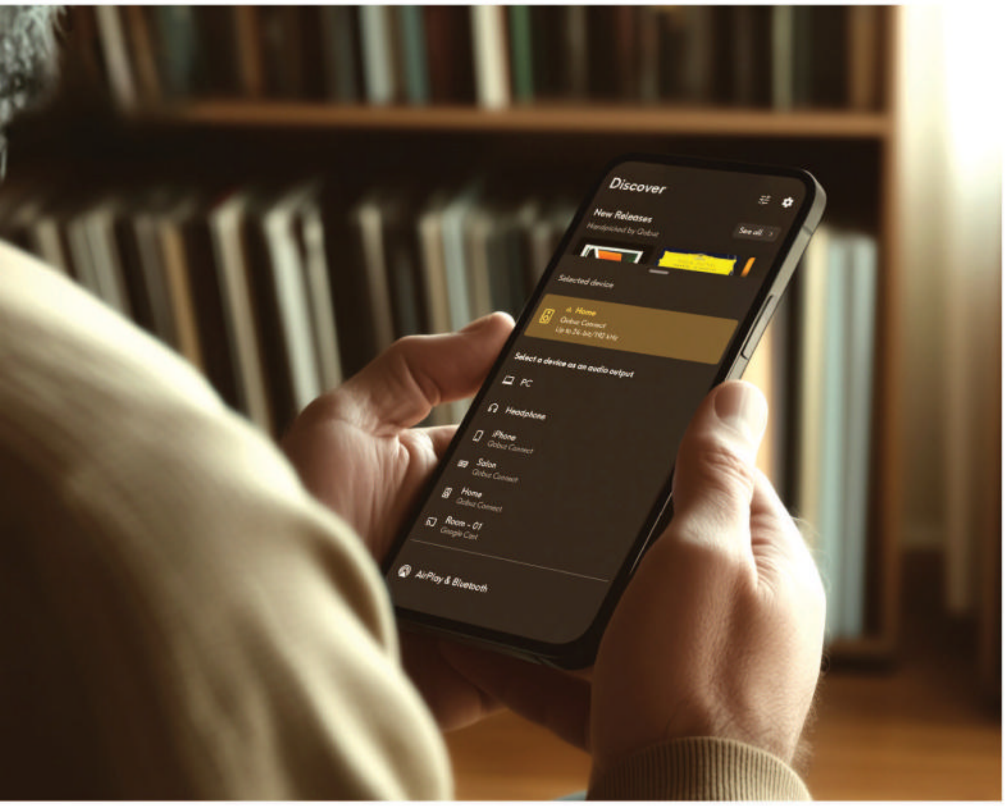
HOW DOES QOBUZ CONNECT WORK?

Previously, to stream music from your Qobuz account to a hi-fi product, such as a music streamer — you either had to use the Qobuz app integrated into the product's own app, a third-party app like Roon, or stream using Bluetooth, AirPlay or Chromecast from your phone or laptop.

The drawback of the latter method is that you aren't getting the full benefit of Qobuz's 100-million-strong catalogue in *lossless* audio quality (up to hi-res 24-bit/192kHz), as AirPlay and Bluetooth are lossy methods of streaming, while Chromecast has a 96kHz limit.

Meanwhile, a third-party app's Qobuz experience is usually rather truncated, with missing features and a less intuitive user interface than the native app. You don't get access to all of Qobuz's curated editorial content, for instance.

With Qobuz Connect, however, you can wirelessly stream music *directly* from



the native Qobuz app to a compatible hi-fi streamer over your home network, with the Qobuz app on your smart device being used as a controller only. Not only will you get the maximum hi-res quality on offer this way (so long as your product supports full-fat hi-res, which most will), but the playback and control experience is much more seamless.

Qobuz Connect creates a direct link between Qobuz's servers and the supporting audio product, with all music being handled and streamed straight from the servers over the internet, without ever passing through or being tethered to your phone.

This means you can use your phone freely — any incoming calls, texts or notifications won't interrupt the stream, and music won't stop playing through the product if you close the Qobuz app or turn your phone off.

In addition, Qobuz Connect syncs up the mobile and desktop apps, and you can even switch audio streams between various connected devices at the tap of a button. If you pause music from your phone to your headphones, for instance, you can pick up exactly where you left off when switching over to a laptop or hi-fi system.

> Controlling music playback using Qobuz's nicely designed app has proven responsive and intuitive

It's a seamless process in action; I've been switching between Qobuz apps repeatedly, and it hasn't faltered so far, with the stream accurately picking up from where I paused.

HOW DO YOU USE QOBUZ CONNECT?

To use Qobuz Connect, open the Qobuz app on your phone and tap the speaker/device icon at the bottom of the screen. You will see the available products (i.e those connected to the same network and supporting Qobuz Connect), with 'Qobuz Connect' clearly stated under the product name. Tap the product you want to stream to, and your music will start playing. It's as simple as that.

If your product has a display, you may well see the Qobuz Connect name and/or logo displayed as the source above the track name and album art. Some products, such as the WiiM Ultra, will also display the sample/bitrate of the track being played, e.g. 24-bit/96kHz and 2820kbps, so you can be assured that the hi-res stream is being transmitted as it should.

Switching between various connected devices in the test room and at home has been a breeze, while controlling music playback using Qobuz's nicely designed app has proven responsive and intuitive, too. It gets two thumbs up from me.

WHICH PRODUCTS SUPPORT QOBUZ CONNECT?

Qobuz Connect is available on iOS, Android, Windows and MacOS devices, and I expect it will be enabled in pretty much every hi-fi and audio product that already supports Qobuz, along with new additions.

Qobuz states its Connect feature has been "developed in collaboration with StreamUnlimited Engineering", which is a technology partner to many hi-fi audio brands that helps integration into existing and new products.

At the time of writing, Qobuz Connect is available in more than 60 manufacturers' products — those from Arcam, Audiolab, dCS, Dynaudio, Eversolo, Focal, JBL Premium Audio, Lumin, Luxman, McIntosh, Naim Audio, HiFi Rose, Rotel, Ruark Audio, WiiM, and many more.

Denon and Marantz have confirmed that all products using the HEOS streaming platform will support Qobuz Connect, while Cambridge Audio has plans to integrate Qobuz Connect into its StreamMagic products later this year.

HOW DO YOU GET QOBUZ CONNECT?

To use Qobuz Connect, you need to be a Qobuz subscriber, paying monthly or annually. As with Tidal Connect and Spotify Connect, there is no extra charge to use the feature; it is part of your subscription.

The main Qobuz Studio tier costs $19.99 per month, which gives you full access to up to 24-bit/192kHz streams across its catalogue. Alternatively, the annual charge of $199.90 gives you a small saving that puts it on par with Tidal's cost for a year.

You can also pay a little extra for the Sublime tier ($20.83/month, billed annually only), which includes discounts of up to 60% on the accompanying download store. Duo (for two people) and Family (for up to six people) plans also exist.

For the hardware, you will most likely need to update your Qobuz Connect-compatible hi-fi product, which simply involves an over-the-air software update (you should get prompted to perform it). Once that's done, your product should appear in your Qobuz app's audio output list. Voila! **Kash Kabir**

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4	Listen in a room environment before you buy	Listen over a noisy shop floor if you can listen at all	No listening
5	Have a nice coffee	There's a coffee shop three doors down in the Mall, mate	Make your own
6	Purchase with pride	Purchase in ignorance	Purchase with fear
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Gold Note's 10 Series

Gold Note's 10 series offers high-end audio equipment known for superior sound quality and craftsmanship. The lineup includes integrated amplifiers, turntables, and digital sources designed for audiophiles seeking clarity and warmth. Key products like the IS-10 amplifier feature advanced DACs and powerful amplification, while the Valore turntables provide precise vinyl playback. Combining vacuum tube technology with modern digital processing, the series delivers rich, natural sound with excellent dynamics. With elegant Italian design and top-tier components, the Gold Note 10 series stands out as a premium choice for high-fidelity home audio enthusiasts.

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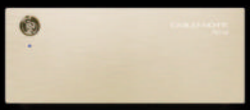
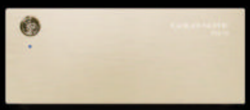


PST-10

The external power supply dedicated to Gold Note turntables.



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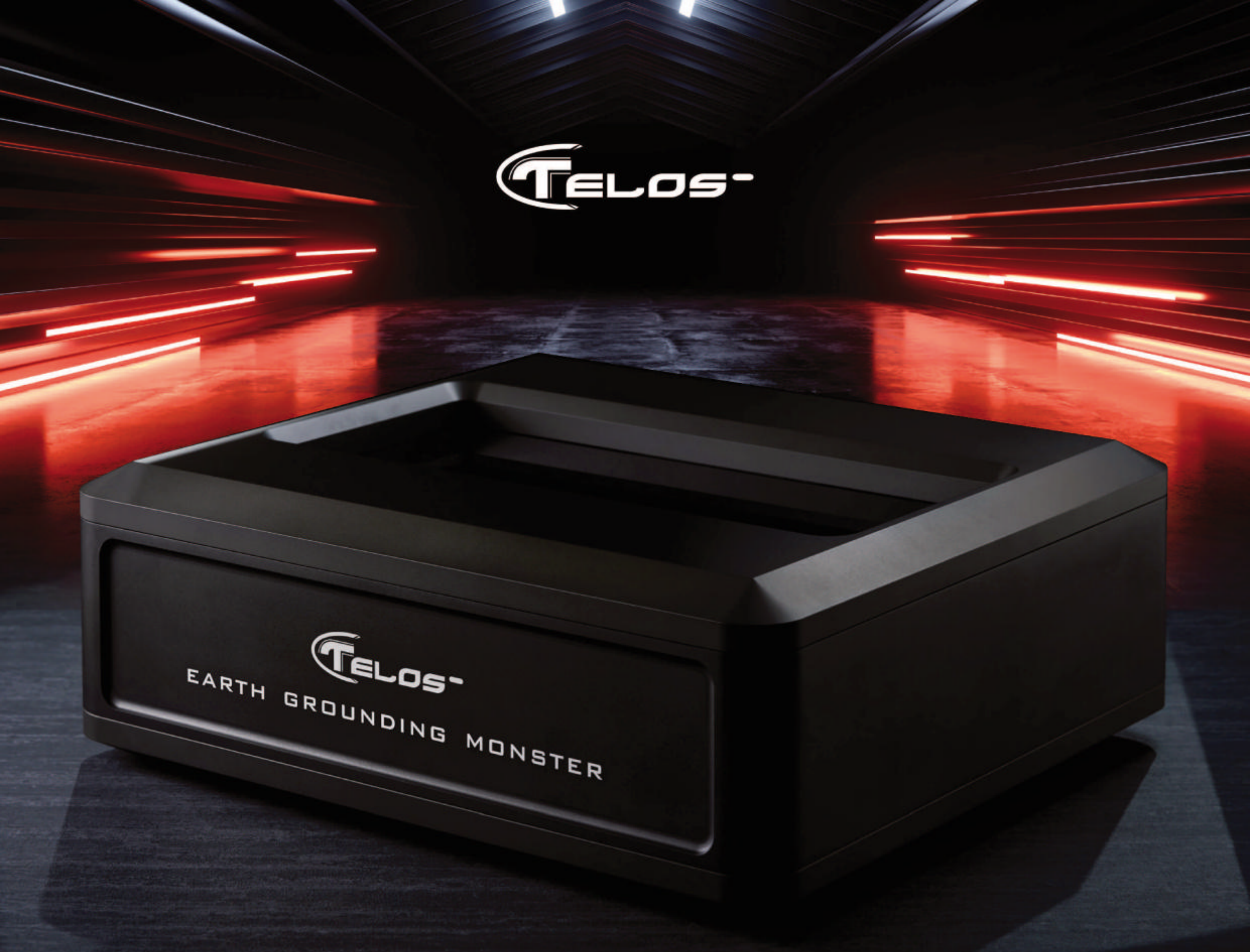

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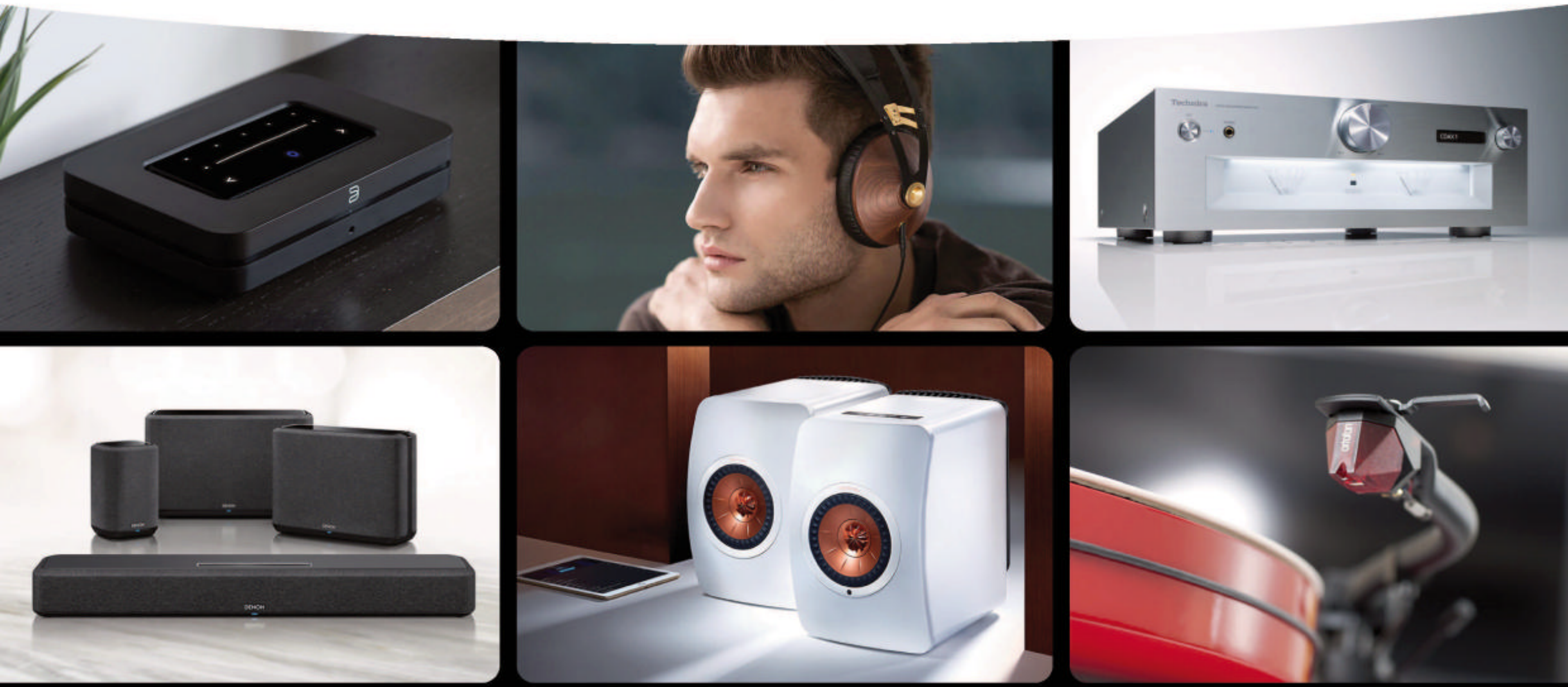

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Massive Attack at Clifton Downs on August 25, 2024 in Bristol, England.

8 BEST MASSIVE ATTACK TRACKS TO TEST YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM

By James Day

Massive Attack have helped define the 'Bristol Sound' since 1988. Emerging from the city's underground club scene, blending elements of sound system culture with hip-hop, electronic music, jazz, funk, dub and reggae, the band has gone on to sell tens of millions of studio albums worldwide, alongside countless compilations, remixes, soundtracks, and EPs – but what are the best Massive Attack tracks to test your hi-fi system?

massive attack

Safe From Harm

1991, Blue Line

Showcasing Massive Attack's early genre-defining sound, this track is a dynamic-range system stress test. The deep, rolling bassline demands subwoofer precision, while Nelson's vocals reveal midrange clarity. Crisp hi-hats and synth swells expose treble accuracy. The spacious mix, with subtle reverb and stereo panning, challenges imaging – details like the shaker or guitar stabs should float distinctly. Any muddiness in the low-end or harshness in vocals signals system flaws.

Five Man Army

1991, Blue Lines

A lo-fi aesthetic and sparse arrangement will test your system's transparency. The deep, dubby bassline requires tight low-end control to avoid bloat. Vocal textures – gruff, whispered, or melodic – demand midrange nuance, revealing distortion or colouration. Percussion, like the crisp snare and tambourine, checks treble detail. The wide stereo field, with panning effects and faint samples, evaluates imaging precision. A good system makes the hazy atmosphere tangible, immersing you in its smoky grip. Kick back to this one… preferably with a Sony Boodo Khan Walkman around your neck.

Angel

1998, Mezzanine

Angel is a beast. The seismic bass intro demands subwoofer power and control – weak systems will crumble under its weight. The fragile vocals test the midrange against the dense mix, the cymbal crashes and guitar stabs probe treble precision, while the wide, reverberant soundstage evaluates imaging. Capturing the track's emotional arc, from gradual beginning to overwhelming crescendo, is the trick here.

Inertia Creeps

1998, Mezzanine

Inertia Creeps is brilliant for putting your hi-fi or headphones through their paces. The deep, pulsing bassline rewards systems with solid low-end control, keeping the groove tight and powerful. Vocalist 3D's layered lyrics, floating through the mix, shine on set-ups with good midrange clarity, bringing out the track's intimacy. Crisp, metallic percussion and eerie synths reveal how well your system handles treble detail. Listen for swirling effects moving precisely around the soundstage, and allow the track's full atmosphere to come alive. In a word, captivating.

Dissolved Girl

1998, Mezzanine

Dissolved Girl features Sarah Jay Hawley's craving, desirous vocals over a sludgy, trip-hop groove. It blends distorted guitars, booming bass and pulsing synths, with a dystopian edge. Its cinematic quality – later featured in *The Matrix* – reflects Massive Attack's ability to create emotive, textured soundscapes. It's a dense mix that'll test any system's cohesion, as it hums and rumbles towards its metalgaze summit, before slowly descending. How a track can be so delicate in parts and unyielding in others is a testament to the mastery the group managed to capture throughout *Mezzanine*.

Paradise Circus

2010, Heligoland

Paradise Circus features the sultry vocals of Mazzy Star's Hope Sandoval over a delicate, looping piano and subtle bass, and is a track that has a dynamic range to showcase high-fidelity audio. The bass is understated but crucial, with low-end control revealing the piano – on systems with excess boom, the details get lost. The strings and sharp snare drum bring out the treble, while elements like the hi-hat should be clearly defined. A high-quality system or headphones will bring the emotional depth of *Paradise Circus* to life.

I Against I

2006, Collected

Originally found on the *Blade II* movie soundtrack, *I Against I* is a gritty, electronic-driven sound system banger with brooding atmospherics befitting a comic-book vampire flick. It's a thrilling test track for any well-tuned system, featuring a driving bassline that sets a powerful foundation, perfect for revealing tight low-end control and depth. Yasiin Bey's (formerly Mos Def) commanding vocal delivery offers ample opportunity to hear how well your set-up handles complex layering. A capable system transforms the track's intensity into an electrifying experience, balancing raw energy with sonic detail.

Sly

1994, Protection

Produced by Nellee Hooper, *Sly* blends ethereal vocals with jazzy chords, a muted trumpet, and a crescendo of epic cinematic strings. This track is awash with lush dynamics and a sense of finesse. The warm, rounded bassline demands low-end control where loose systems will muddy the groove. Nigerian-born singer-songwriter Nicolette's vocals probe midrange clarity, while the trumpet and strings, floating in a wide soundstage, check treble sparkle and imaging. Reverb tails and subtle percussion reveal decay accuracy. A great system will render the track's intimate, cinematic atmosphere with clarity and depth.

Sparks

MAD!

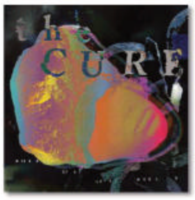
TRANSGRESSIVE

Still surfing a gloriously extended late-career comeback wave, Ron and Russell Mael deliver their twenty-sixth studio album, bolstered by a decade-long run of Top 10 albums, laudatory documentaries and acclaimed left-field collaborations. Although both are now closer to 80 than to 70, the strangely ageless Los Angeles duo's high-gloss fusion of art-rock, chamber-pop and avant-cabaret elements remains reliably pin-sharp and lyrically droll. Meanwhile, the brothers are playing some of their biggest live shows ever.

Ron Mael's songwriting has always had a romantic undertow, albeit typically veiled beneath multiple layers of tongue-twisting wordplay and deadpan mirth. Unusually, much of MAD! ruminates on love and heartache in a more-or-less straightforward fashion. The sparkling, softly throbbing ballad *Everybody Looks Great At Night* belies its sardonic title with achingly emotional yearning, while *A Little Bit Of Light Banter*, for all its jokey tone, celebrates the shared humour that keeps couples together. *Lord Have Mercy* is a tender domestic vignette that builds into an anthemic soft-rocker. The lushly orchestrated heart-tugger *Drowned In A Sea Of Tears* is the bittersweet confession of a cheerfully clueless optimist who fails to spot his partner's growing depression.

But fans of Sparks as quirk-pop pranksters can rest easy, because MAD! also contains plenty of the duo's signature comic flourishes. Paying semi-ironic tribute to the mighty motorway that cuts through LA, *I-405 Rules* is a thunderous mini-opera, stern and discordant and loaded with drama. The gloriously titled *Running Up A Tab At The Hotel For The Fab* dissects the fake celebrity lifestyle over twangy Duane Eddy-ish guitar rumbles and cinematic strings. *Don't Dog It* is a doomed quest for philosophical truth that reduces the meaning of life to robo-voiced slogans and nagging mechanical piano riffs, sounding like a great lost Devo track.

As ever with the Maels, the relentless high-camp levity and heavily mannered, shrill, staccato delivery can sometimes jar on MAD!. But after more than half a century of honing their own instantly recognisable art-rock style, through feast and famine years alike, the odd couple are hardly likely to compromise now. One of the most strident tracks here is titled *Do Things My Own Way*, an ear-pummelling belter as obstinate as its title suggests. This is the Sparks manifesto in miniature: even when their music grates occasionally, their impeccably polished eff-you attitude remains immensely compelling.



The Cure

Mixes Of A Lost World

POLYDOR/FICTION

Here we have a sumptuous, fully realised remix of The Cure's first new album in 16 years, with artists including Four Tet, Paul Oakenfold, Orbital and Shanti Celeste behind the controls, fleshing out and manipulating Robert Smith and co's originals in a way that makes them feel even more cinematic. Eight songs remixed by 24 artists, often feeling like the comedown tent at an EDM festival, blissed out and nearly always chilled, whether it's Mogwai's transcendental imagining of *Endsong*, Mental Overdrive's temperate, floor-filling take on *I Never Can Say Goodbye*, or Chino Moreno's haunted revisualisation of *Warsong*. Nothing is rushed, nothing hasty, very little is upbeat — as befits a band with such a rep for beautiful misery. Mixes Of A Lost World comes as a three-LP/three-CD set with all mixes plus originals, or a two-LP/two-CD set with just the mixes. All The Cure's recording royalties go to War Child.

tangerine dream
FROM VIRGIN TO QUANTUM YEARS
COVENTRY CATHEDRAL 22

Tangerine Dream

From Virgin To Quantum Years: Coventry Cathedral 22

KSCOPE

Tangerine Dream represent a singular proposition — they continue to perform and record, but with none of their original members. Indeed, the death of co-founder Edgar Froese did not mean the death of the group. Today the band consists of Thorsten Quaeschning, Hoshiko Yamane and Paul Frick, and for this concert Marillion guitarist Steve Rothery guests. This 2022 set at once revives memories of the group's 70s grandeur and offers a strong taste of their 21st-century iteration. *Stratosfear* and *Phaedra* are faithfully replicated in all of their analogue antiquity, and newer material, from albums such as Quantum Gate (2017), holds up well by comparison — *Continuum*, for example has a mellow, post-rave feel to it, with its bubbling electronic keyboards, and the quite lovely *It Is Time To Leave When Everyone Is Dancing* helicopters from the dance floor into inner head-space.

BRIAN ENO & BEATIE WOLFE
LATERAL

Brian Eno & Beatie Wolfe

Luminal & Lateral

VERVE

Recorded on and off throughout 2024, this collaboration between Brian Eno and environmentalist/musician Beatie Wolfe arose from their meeting to give a talk on 'Art And Climate' at the SXSW festival. They use as prompts words from other languages that have no equivalent in English, such as 'Ailyak' (Bulgarian), which means going slow, enjoying the process, and 'Commuovere' (Italian), the experience of being moved. The result is an album of textural uniqueness, a sonic fabric hitherto unknown. Tracks on Luminal such as *Hopelessly At Ease* are almost unsettling seductive, while Wolfe's every sung syllable on *Shhh* looms large and expansive. The second disc, Lateral, consists of *Big Empty Country*, an eight-part piece, an ambient suite based on a two-note motif, as if homing in on a detail from Luminal, dwelling on it, tenderly bleeding it dry. A wholly pleasurable, wholly original album.

King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard

Phantom Island

P(DOOM)

It says everything about the Aussie shape-shifters range that the idea for this, one of its jolliest albums to date, came just days after the release of one of their heaviest. Promoting their thrash metal onslaught PetroDragonic Apocalypse, the band played the famed Hollywood Bowl, where a chance encounter with LA's Philharmonic Orchestra laid the groundwork for Phantom Island. Its 10 songs are bombastic, unabashed boogies, each one stacked with layer upon layer of symphonic volume. The single *Deadstick* opens in a swirl of high-energy drums, with bold trumpets and rock guitar, while *Lonely Cosmos* builds up to the good times, a tragic string melody getting lifted up by some bopping bass.

King Gizzard have big plans for this album, playing it in full with a different orchestra at each show, and the quality of this happy-go-lucky collection is worthy of those lofty ambitions.

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